

## African American Historians and the Antislavery Struggle

Claire Parfait, Université Paris 13/ délégation CNRS LARCA, Université Paris Diderot

In 2006, in their introduction to *Prophets of Protest. Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*, Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer provided the following assessment of the changing reputation of abolitionists: “Few groups in American history have experienced as complete a reassessment of their life and legacy as the abolitionists. Reviled by their contemporaries, and so often maligned or misunderstood by historians, the abolitionists have only in the last generation or so begun to receive a fair hearing among scholars of nineteenth-century America.”<sup>1</sup> The changing reputation of abolitionists has much to do with the situation of African Americans in American society at a given time. Thus, abolitionists were praised in the years that immediately followed the Civil War and emancipation, and were reviled roughly from the end of Reconstruction—the late 1870s—to the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>2</sup>

Eric Foner describes Reconstruction as that brief moment when “the country experimented with genuine interracial democracy. Then Reconstruction was overturned by a violent racist reaction.”<sup>3</sup> In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as David Blight and others have documented, there was a rewriting of slavery as a benign system; a wave of nostalgia for the Antebellum days (partly due to the fast changes the nation was undergoing, in particular industrialization, urbanization, and massive waves of “new” immigrants), could be seen in the early 1870s in the nation’s periodicals, which highlighted the attachment slaves had for their mostly kind masters; what Blight has called a “literature of reunion” (i.e. aiming at reconciling North and South)<sup>4</sup> celebrated the old plantation South, in periodicals as well as books by Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, among others.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the Civil War was redefined as a conflict over the right to secede rather than over the issue of slavery. The situation would gradually grow worse for African Americans, especially in the South, with mounting racial violence and a peak in the number of lynchings in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. African Americans gradually lost the rights they had

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<sup>1</sup> MCCARTHY, Timothy Patrick & John STAUFFER, eds. *Prophets of Protest. Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*. New York: The New Press, 2006; xiii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv-xv. McCarthy and Stauffer note that their reputation improved during the Great Depression, then declined again in the 1950s, a time of conservatism.

<sup>3</sup> FONER, ERIC and Joshua BROWN. *Forever Free. The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005: xx. The Jim Crow system, racial violence and economic oppression led W.E.B. Du Bois to declare in 1903 that “despite compromise, war, and struggle, the Negro is not free.” DU BOIS, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. New York: Dover publications, Dover Thrift editions, 1994; 24.

<sup>4</sup> BLIGHT, David W. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001; 216-7.

<sup>5</sup> Harris’s *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1881) and more so Page’s *In Ole Virginia* (1887), are representative of the plantation tradition.

gained through the Civil War Amendments as well as through legislation; in 1883, the Supreme Court invalidated the Civil Rights Act of 1875, and made racial segregation legal with *Plessy Versus Ferguson* in 1896. This is the period that historian Rayford Logan termed the “nadir.”<sup>6</sup>

It is also the context in which many abolitionists wrote their memoirs. As Julie Roy Jeffrey rightly argues, as the history of the Civil War was rewritten as a conflict to preserve the Union rather than to put an end to slavery, “the abolitionists lost any claim to historical importance.” The memoirs of white and black abolitionists “challenged every important point of the reconciliation narrative, trying to salvage the nobility of their work for emancipation and African Americans and defending their own participation in the great events of their day.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to setting the record straight, many of the abolitionists’ memoirs also pointed to the current situation and the problems African Americans were facing in the South, hoping to encourage younger readers to take up the fight for black rights at a time when these rights were being taken away.<sup>8</sup>

Julie Roy Jeffrey’s *Abolitionists Remember* (2008) and Manisha Sinha’s article “The Civil War at 150. Memory and Meaning,” in *Common-Place* (2014) offer an in-depth analysis of these recollections, authored by men and women (more men than women), blacks and whites (more whites than blacks). I will just highlight a few points:

Unsurprisingly, whether the authors of memoirs were black or white, all insist on the heroic aspect of the enterprise: the abolitionists were brave men (more rarely women, though women are mentioned in most memoirs), ready to face the dangers of fighting for what was a just but unpopular cause, in the South of course, but also in the North. Memoirs thus systematically remind readers that abolitionists were a minority, that they were denounced as dangerous fanatics, often imprisoned, and that antislavery lecturers were frequently the targets of mob violence.

Depending on the author, the divisions in the antislavery movement are more or less glossed over. In *Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict* (1869),<sup>9</sup> Samuel J. May, a Unitarian minister who was one of the original members of the American Anti-Slavery Society and a lecturer on the antislavery circuit, only made brief references to the quarrels, thus emphasizing “abolitionism as a unified movement.”<sup>10</sup> In his third autobiography, *Life*

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<sup>6</sup> LOGAN, Rayford. *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901*. New York: Dial Press, 1954.

<sup>7</sup> JEFFREY, Julie Roy. *Abolitionists Remember. Antislavery Autobiographies & the Unfinished Work of Emancipation*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008; 1; 3.

<sup>8</sup> SINHA, Manisha. “The Civil War at 150. Memory and Meaning.” *Common-Place* vol. 14 n°2, Winter 2014

[http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-14/no-02/sinha/#.XBuw\\_i17Tq0](http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-14/no-02/sinha/#.XBuw_i17Tq0) Sinha notes that for a long time, these recollections were disregarded, seen as “self-aggrandizing” and unreliable.

<sup>9</sup> MAY, Samuel J. *Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict*. Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1869.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember*, op. cit.; 27.

and *Times of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1881,<sup>11</sup> Douglass explains his break with Garrison in detail: his decision to start a paper of his own met with a lot of opposition. His change of opinion in regard to the Constitution (which Garrison saw as a pro-slavery document) and to political abolition (Garrison was against it and in favor of not voting) made him an “apostate.”<sup>12</sup> Yet Douglass becomes more critical of Garrison when he speaks of the latter’s influence in essentially disbanding the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1865. Douglass reminds readers that for himself and other abolitionists such as Wendell Phillips, the fight was not over until black men had the right to vote.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to autobiographies and memoirs written by abolitionists, the first biographies of major figures of the movement appeared in the decades that followed the Civil War; they were often the work of children and friends of abolitionists. These works are also sites of contests over the memory of the abolitionist movement and more specifically over who should be considered its real leader or leaders. At the heart of the dispute was the issue of moral suasion versus political abolitionism. Thus, for instance, George Julian and Henry Stanton, two men who had been active in abolition politics, defended political abolitionists and described moral abolitionism of the Garrisonian kind as irrelevant and ineffective.<sup>14</sup>

The Garrisonians disagreed and worked hard to preserve the image of Garrison as the movement’s founder and leader: a few examples are Oliver Johnson’s eloquently titled *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* (1879), or Parker Pillsbury’s *Acts of The Anti-Slavery Apostles* (1883); the same can be said of the 4-volume biography of Garrison by two of his sons, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life Told by His Children* (1885, 1889), and of Archibald Grimke’s *William Lloyd Garrison, the Abolitionist* (1891).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> DOUGLASS, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Hartford, CT: Park Publishing Company, 1881.

<sup>12</sup> “My friends in Boston had been informed of what I was intending, and I expected to find them favorably disposed toward my cherished enterprise. In this I was mistaken. They had many reasons against it. First, no such paper was needed; secondly, it would interfere with my usefulness as a lecturer; thirdly, I was better fitted to speak than to write; fourthly, the paper could not succeed”: Douglass, *Life and Times*, op. cit.; 264; “an apostate”; 266.

<sup>13</sup> According to him, on that point, abolitionists were divided: “Mr. Garrison himself, though foremost for the abolition of slavery, was not yet quite ready to join this advanced movement. In this respect he was in the rear of Mr. Phillips” (*Life and Times*, op. cit.; 387).

<sup>14</sup> JULIAN, George W. *Political Recollections, 1840 to 1872*. Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Co., 1884; STANTON, Henry B. *Random Recollections*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887 (Stanton was the husband of women’s rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton). On these two works, see Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember*, op. cit.; 183-192.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey, op. cit.; 192-198. JOHNSON, Oliver. *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*. Boston: B.B. Russell, 1879; PILLSBURY, Parker. *Acts of The Anti-Slavery Apostles*. Concord, NH: Clague, Wegman, Schlicht & Co., printers, Rochester, NY, 1883; GARRISON, Wendell Phillips and Francis Jackson GARRISON. *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life Told by His Children*. New York: Century Company, 1885-1889. In her article on the biography of Garrison by his children, Hélène Quanquin underlines the stakes of this work of memory and history: preserve the memory of the movement, but also the image of their father, as the founder and leader of American abolitionism,

This contest between the various trends of abolitionists and between the leaders of each trend, explains why in 1892, Douglass lamented that “the time has not come when a true and impartial history of the Anti-slavery movement can be written or reasonably be expected. The preferences for modes of action and partialities” had descended from fathers to sons and “made the task of writing a true history hard if not impossible.”<sup>16</sup>

The influence of abolitionists’ recollections was rather limited, they had few reviews and sold poorly. Even the one that was the most likely to succeed both critically and commercially, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, sold less than 2,500 copies in a year or so.<sup>17</sup> Part of the reason for the lack of interest was the fact that many of these works possessed little literary merit and failed to meet the evolving criteria for autobiographical excellence.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, emancipation grew more remote, slavery was being rewritten as a benign system, and the nation at large did not want a reminder of an unpleasant past. The memoirs seemed increasingly irrelevant.<sup>19</sup>

One work that had better sales while offering “another form of historical memory”<sup>20</sup> is William Still’s *The Underground Railroad*, first published in 1872.<sup>21</sup> William Still, a black man from Philadelphia who was very active on the underground railroad, recounts the stories of fugitives, partly based on the records he kept. As Jeffrey notes, the work suggests

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most notably against the claims of Wendell Phillips, whom many abolitionists saw as equal in importance to Garrison himself: QUANQUIN, H  l  ne. ‘William Lloyd Garrison par ses enfants. Une correspondance familiale politique’. *Epistolaire, Revue de l’A.I.R.  *, n  40, Paris : Librairie Honor   Champion, 2014 : 185-193. During the discussion that followed the delivery of this paper on January 25, 2019, H  l  ne Quanquin noted that while Garrison and Phillips were long seen as equally important in the antislavery struggle, Garrison eventually displaced Phillips, partly because Garrison’s children were very active in promoting their father’s memory, while Phillips was childless. GRIMKE, Archibald H. *William Lloyd Garrison, the Abolitionist*, New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1891. Archibald H. Grimke was born in slavery and was half-brother to the famous Grimke sisters. In his biography, Garrison is always the “pioneer,” even if Grimke acknowledges some flaws in his hero: “Garrison was the most dogmatic, as he was the most earnest of men. It was almost next to impossible for him to understand that his way was not the only way to attain a given end.” <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14555/14555-h/14555-h.htm#chap10>. Grimke adds that Garrison could not bear opposition and details the falling out between Phillips and Garrison at the end of the war.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Douglass to Marshall Pierce, February 12, 1892, quoted in Larry GARA, ‘Who Was an Abolitionist?’ in *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists*, Martin Duberman, ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965: 32-51.

<sup>17</sup> Yet the publisher, a subscription house of Hartford, CT, had expended a tremendous amount of time, money and energy, to promote the book and employed an impressive number of agents to sell it. While Douglass himself declared that he was satisfied with the sales figures, the Park Publishing Company was disappointed: Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember*, op. cit.: 166-173. In 1965, Larry Gara had argued that “... after the struggle, many tried to make their support of the abolitionist crusade retroactive. The heroism which authentic antislavery veterans flaunted in their memoirs met a sympathetic response from thousands of readers. Men with even a remote connection with the crusade or one of its leaders became legendary figures in countless northern communities.” A book history approach such as Jeffrey’s reveals that Gara overstated the response of readers to these works. Gara, ‘Who Was an Abolitionist?’ op. cit.; 49.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember*, op. cit.; 7; 9.

<sup>19</sup> As Du Bois would argue in his 1935 *Black Reconstruction in America*, the facts of history were changed so that the story would “make pleasant reading for Americans.” DU BOIS, W.E.B. *Black Reconstruction in America*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1935: chapter 17.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember*, op. cit.; 62.

<sup>21</sup> STILL, William. *The Underground Railroad*. Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872.

that “there was a racial divide in the construction of the past.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Eric Foner argues that the memoirs published after the war “tended to make white abolitionists the central actors of the story.”<sup>23</sup> According to David Blight, Douglass’s latest biographer, Douglass’s *Life and Times* was meant to forge “an abolitionist memory of the Civil War,” but also to make Douglass’s life “a kind of monument,” a story of “increasing fame and achievement.”<sup>24</sup> William Still’s book, on the other hand, builds a collective black heroic memory. In his *Underground Railroad*, white abolitionists “were marginalized. Blacks became the engines of their own liberation.”<sup>25</sup> Still’s characters are ready to die rather than be re-enslaved, they can be seen fighting slave catchers in both text and image, and this runs against the watered-down version of slavery which was starting to take hold, in articles, illustrations, and history books.<sup>26</sup>

To get a fuller picture of the efforts of abolitionists and their children and friends to commemorate the movement, one should also look at abolitionist reunions after the war, at commemorations, at monuments (Garrison died in 1879 and his sculpture was dedicated in Boston in 1886). This is only a brief overview of the question.

The watered-down version of slavery went hand in hand with a redefinition of the causes of the war, which was no longer about slavery but about the right of states to secede; in this rewriting of history, abolitionists were misguided fanatics who had enormous responsibility in causing the war (slavery itself would have disappeared in time); the role of black soldiers in their own liberation was increasingly forgotten.

African American historians attempted to correct this mainstream narrative, and I will briefly look at the way they handled slavery, abolitionists and slave rebellions.

William Wells Brown, a fugitive slave and Garrisonian abolitionist, vigorously denounced slavery as a “curse” to both slaves and slave owners, in *The Rising Son* (1873); Brown offers portraits of white heroes (Garrison, the “pioneer” of the movement, Wendell Phillips, “America’s ablest orator”) and black heroes: those fighting against slavery and for equal rights in the North, slaves fleeing slavery in the South and demonstrating both courage and ingenuity; if Garrison is the “acknowledged leader of the movement,” Frederick Douglass is “the most wonderful man America has ever produced, white or black.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember*, op. cit.; 62.

<sup>23</sup> FONER, Eric. *Gateway to Freedom. The Hidden History of America’s Fugitive Slaves*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015; 11.

<sup>24</sup> BLIGHT, David W. *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018; 620.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember*, op. cit.: 62.

<sup>26</sup> Among other signs of this rewriting of slavery, an article by James Lane Allen in *The Century Magazine* (October 1887: 852-67) entitled “Mrs. Stowe’s ‘Uncle Tom’ at Home in Kentucky,” underlines “the kind, even affectionate, relations of the races under the old regime,” and describes slavery as a system in which “well-treated negroes cared not a snap for liberty.”

<sup>27</sup> While Brown does not dwell on the quarrels that divided abolitionists and praises Garrisonians and non-Garrisonians alike, his portraits of black abolitionists reflect the very real animosities among the latter: thus, the antislavery lecturer Charles Remond was a much overrated man while Charles W.C.

In 1883, in his monumental *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880*, George Washington Williams depicts Garrison as the hero of the antislavery struggle, while also inscribing black abolitionists in his story, and noting that the influence of Douglass (“destined by nature and God to be a giant in the great moral agitation for the extinction of slavery and the redemption of his race”) was “second only to that of Mr. Garrison.” Unlike Brown, Williams describes the break between Garrison and Douglass and sides with Garrison, showing old quarrels were not yet settled in the early 1880s. Altogether Williams builds a case for blacks as activists and rebels, and justifies slave rebellions by the cruelty of the peculiar institution. Nat Turner is both a religious fanatic and a “black John Brown.” This is no small compliment since for Williams, John Brown “ranks among the world’s greatest heroes,” a man who was originally seen as a fanatic but is now getting his proper place in history, that of a saint.<sup>28</sup>

In his 1887 *Men of Mark*, a collective biography, a kind of Who’s Who among African Americans, William J. Simmons downplays the divisions in the movement, wrongly claiming that Douglass and Garrison always had “cordial and pleasant” relations. Simmons still presents Garrison as “the great pioneer,” with other whites leading the movement. However, Simmons only provides sketches of Blacks so that, as in Still’s book, whites are (logically) marginalized. Douglass is described as the greatest African American that ever lived. And it is the heroism of fugitive slaves that encouraged “the grand little army of Abolitionists.” As to slavery itself, Simmons has very clear views on the topic: there is no question that it was wrong, and Simmons’s treatment of rebels is revealing: Denmark Vesey, the leader of a failed attempt at rebellion in 1822 South Carolina, is a hero and a martyr, Nat Turner is a “heroic black John Brown,” “one of the greatest emancipators of the nineteenth century.” According to Simmons, Turner’s rebellion, in which over 50 whites were killed, can be fully justified by the violence of the system of slavery.<sup>29</sup> The same year *Men of Mark* came out (1887), Theodore Roosevelt published a biography of Thomas Hart Benton, in which he was very critical of abolitionists who he thought had received “absurdly

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Pennington was a drunkard. WELLS BROWN, William. *The Rising Son; or, The Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race*. 1873. Boston: A.G. Brown, 1882: chapter 35; chapter 48; chapter 50.

<sup>28</sup> Unlike Brown, Williams both praises and criticizes Douglass, saying for instance that he “was rarely eloquent except when denouncing slavery,” that “His attempts at wit usually missed fire. He could not be funny.” WILLIAMS, George Washington. *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880. Negroes as Slaves, as Soldiers, and as Citizens*. Vol. 2: New York, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1883; 425; 426; 437; 215. On the bad blood between Williams and Douglass and the reactions of the contemporary press, see Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, op. cit.; 640-642. At the same time, in the periodical press, John Brown was described as a fanatic, a man who was warped and whose actions had disastrous results. Abolitionists had been wrong to admire him. Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember*, op. cit.; 156.

<sup>29</sup> This is all the more remarkable on the part of Simmons as he was a minister, and did not hesitate to point at flaws in some of the subjects of his sketches: thus Denmark Vesey got the money to buy his freedom by drawing a prize at a lottery, which was wrong even if he made good use of the money, and Pennington’s example should only be followed to a point: “shun the vice which at the last clouded his brilliant intellect...” SIMMONS, William J. *Men of Mark. Eminent, Progressive and Rising*, Cleveland, Ohio: Geo. M. Rewell, 1887; 74; 154; 156-7 (actually an extract from William Still’s preface to *The Underground Railroad*); 1036; 915.

exaggerated praise.” Yes, they were brave and they were sincere, but in fact they did very little to bring about emancipation. On the contrary, “much of what they did was positively harmful to the cause for which they were fighting.”<sup>30</sup>

In *Progress of a Race*, first published in 1897, so during the decade that saw a peak in the number of lynchings, there are both white and black heroes; while the authors underline the role of Garrison (“there never was a more intrepid leader against slavery than William Lloyd Garrison”), they single out Douglass as “the most remarkable man of Negro blood yet produced in the United States” and fail to mention any disagreements between the two men. They devote considerable space to the heroism of fugitives, and to William Still’s book on the underground railroad.<sup>31</sup> They also clearly state that the real cause of the war was slavery. As to rebels, their position is more ambiguous: John Brown is praised: “his immortal name will be pronounced with blessings in all lands and by all people till the end of time,” yet only two slave rebellions are mentioned, the “Negro plot” in New York in 1741, and Nat Turner’s rebellion about which they say little, save that it showed that slaves wanted freedom and were not as docile as slaveholders claimed.<sup>32</sup> This may have been due to the general context of the 1890s: at a time when racial violence targeting blacks was at its highest, when the press made much of black criminality and presented the death of African Americans as a comic subject, perhaps the authors had chosen to tread carefully on the topic of black antebellum violence.<sup>33</sup>

A few years later, Booker T. Washington published *The Story of the Negro* (1909). His message is somewhat confusing as he first asserts that, “As a rule, the Negro was not an anti-slavery agitator,” then proceeds to demonstrate the very opposite, by looking at early black abolitionists, late 18<sup>th</sup>-century petitions to end slavery, the role of black lecturers on the antislavery circuit, conventions, fugitives and the underground railroad. For Washington,

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<sup>30</sup> ROOSEVELT, Theodore. *Thomas Hart Benton*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, American Statesmen Series, 1887; 158-9; 292. Roosevelt acknowledges that slavery was the main cause of the war but contends that it wasn’t the only one: the “separatist spirit” was another, as was the ambition of men such as Jefferson Davis: 295. Thomas Hart Benton (1782-1858) was a Senator from Missouri and a vigorous proponent of western expansion.

<sup>31</sup> At about the same time, Wilbur Siebert’s *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (1898) “established a long-term tradition that tended to glorify white abolitionists by collecting their personal accounts of slave rescues (black involvement was not denied but it was not a primary concern”: FERRÉ-RODE, Sandrine. ‘Competing Narratives. The Underground Railroad to Canada in Historiographical Perspective’, in *Undoing Slavery. American Abolitionism in Transnational Perspective*, Michaël Roy, Marie-Jeanne Rossignol and Claire Parfait, eds. Paris : Éditions Rue d’Ulm/Presses de l’ENS, 2018 : 57-74.

<sup>32</sup> KLETZING, Henry F. and William CROGMAN. *Progress of a Race or The Remarkable Advancement of the Afro-American Negro from the Bondage of Slavery, Ignorance and Poverty, to the Freedom of Citizenship, Intelligence, Affluence, Honor and Trust*. Naperville, Illinois: J.L. Nichols, 1897; 86; 447; 98; 57.

<sup>33</sup> PARFAIT, Claire. ‘From Heroic to Comic Death: Representations of African-American Dead in the American Press from the Civil War to the Early Twentieth Century’, in *Racial, Ethnic and Homophobic Violence: Killing in the Name of Otherness*, Michel Prum, Bénédicte Deschamps and Marie-Claude Barbier, eds. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007: 43-55. One example is the caricature of a black child being threatened by an alligator; see “Great Expectations,” *Scribner’s Monthly* September 1878; 758; similar representations became more widespread at the turn of the century, when they appeared on greeting cards, cigar box labels as well as in early movies, like *The Gater and the Pickaninny*, 1903.

fugitive slaves did more to bring about abolition than any other agency, because they told the North what slavery really was, showed that blacks were human beings and that they were not happy in slavery. Altogether then, black abolitionists are the real heroes of the story (but after all the book is titled *The Story of the Negro*). As for rebellions, Washington lists a number of slave “insurrections,” and claims that “the slave learned from his master the desire to be free.” Yet Washington claims that insurrections brought little good (Nat Turner is described as a “fanatic”) and that no black uprising is to be feared in the South at the time he writes the book. This is similar to the line of thought defended in *Progress of a Race* and likely obeys the same motives, i.e. appeasement at a time of great racial violence.<sup>34</sup>

By the time W.E.B. Du Bois published *Black Reconstruction* in 1935, little had changed in the generally negative assessment of abolitionists. Du Bois was an exception when he praised the abolitionists for their “moral courage and sacrifice” and called their movement a “crusade.”<sup>35</sup> He also insisted that slavery was the cause of the Civil War.<sup>36</sup>

In his 1947 *From Slavery to Freedom*, black historian John Hope Franklin described the anti-slavery movement as a powerful religious crusade, part of a larger humanitarian movement in Europe and North America, one connected with other reform movements such as temperance, peace and women’s rights. Franklin placed Blacks at the center of this story: black abolitionists preached abolition long before the birth of Garrison (Williams had made the same claim) and were even more determined than white abolitionists; Garrison appears as the theorist of the movement, while the description Franklin provides of Douglass turns the latter into a legendary figure.

In spite of works like that of Franklin and a few others, the reassessment of abolitionists really starts in the late 1950s and 1960s and coincides—although this is no coincidence of course—with the civil rights movement. One major landmark is *The Antislavery Vanguard. New Essays on the Abolitionists*, edited by Martin Duberman and published in 1965; another is *Antislavery Reconsidered. New Perspectives on the Abolitionists* edited by Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman (1979). At a time when most historians viewed abolitionism as a white and middle-class movement, another landmark is Benjamin

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<sup>34</sup> WASHINGTON, Booker T. *The Story of the Negro. The Rise of the Race from Slavery*. 1909. New York: Peter Smith, 1940; 281; 231; 184.

<sup>35</sup> On the religious dimension of abolitionism, see Nathalie Caron’s paper, also delivered on January 25, 2019 at the one-day symposium « De l’antiesclavagisme à l’abolitionnisme, 1776-1865 », University Paul Valéry, Montpellier 3.

<sup>36</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, op. cit.: chapter 17. In 1940, as Michaël Roy notes in his *De l’antiesclavagisme à l’abolition de l’esclavage*, Frank Owsley, the president of the Southern Historical Association, compared the discourse of abolitionists and their denunciation of the South to the propaganda spread by Goebbels and Stalin: ROY, Michaël. *De l’antiesclavagisme à l’abolition de l’esclavage. États-Unis 1776-1865*. Neuilly: Atlande, Collection Clefs concours, 2018: 20-21. This is extreme, to say the least, but other historians of the 1940s and 50s variously described abolitionists as fanatics, or at best as men suffering from various neuroses (Manisha Sinha notes that David Donald portrays them as “social misfits and psychological basket cases”: SINHA, Manisha. ‘Coming of Age: The Historiography of Black Abolitionism’, in McCarthy & Stauffer, eds, *Prophets of Protest*, op. cit.; 23-38.

Quarles's *Black Abolitionists* (1969) which, as the title indicates, puts black abolitionists at the center of the story.

Since then, a lot of work has been done on abolitionism, so that as Manisha Sinha notes in her essay on the historiography of the question in *Prophets of Protest* (2006), there is now "an embarrassment of riches" (37). Sinha's latest work, *The Slave's Cause*, attempts a new synthesis by looking at the antislavery movement in the long term and in an international context. Sinha places African Americans at the heart of a movement which she describes as radical and interracial, a movement "which addressed the entrenched problems of exploitation and disfranchisement in a liberal democracy and anticipated debates over race, labor and empire."<sup>37</sup>

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