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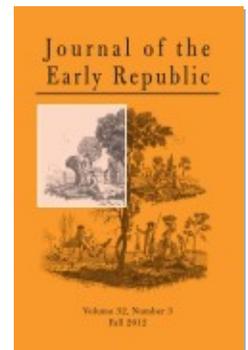
*The Liberty Party, 1840–1848: Antislavery Third-Party
Politics in the United States* (review)

John W. Quist

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classroom use, and this one will have a distinguished career in collegiate education. The writing is clear and accessible without undue oversimplification. More important, Johnson's willingness to gaze more than once at the landscape beyond Supreme Court windows in search of relationships between judicial public policy, commerce, and transportation will permit use of the book in settings beyond constitutional history courses.

Not surprisingly, there are points of contestation and regret: I miss (to the extent that one can tell without footnotes) nonlegal sources such as newspapers, particularly in sections that assess *Gibbons'* sociopolitical importance. I certainly wish for better detail about the case of *Green v. Biddle*, the second opinion of which did not lead to mollification of the public, as Johnson claims; on the contrary, given the quite explosive rebellion afoot in Kentucky, it had the opposite effect. Here, the tendency to organize materials around legal headings (commerce, contract, and so on) makes it difficult to perceive important connections between doctrinal apples and oranges. And, finally, I wish that Johnson had resisted the powerful tug of twenty-first-century law practice in the conclusion, instead emphasizing the significance of the decision for the long and formative nineteenth century. For one thing, conclusions tied to very recent law reports will ultimately date the book.

But these are matters of scholarly taste, training, and emphasis; they no doubt originate in two scholars' differing aspirations for the field of American constitutional history. *Gibbons v. Ogden* goes more than far enough in the direction of society and economy to redirect and correct the master narrative; hands down, it is the best available account of the ruling in print.

SANDRA F. VANBURKLEO teaches legal, constitutional, and early American history at Wayne State University in Detroit. She was the lead editor for *Constitutionalism and American Culture: Writing the New Constitutional History* and the author of many other works in legal and constitutional studies. Her current book, *Gender Remade: Statehood and Citizenship in the New Northwest, 1879–1912*, is in preparation for publication.

The Liberty Party, 1840–1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the United States. By Reinhard O. Johnson. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. Pp. x + 500. Cloth, \$75.00.)

Reviewed by John W. Quist

Students of American abolitionism have long been familiar with the work of Reinhard O. Johnson. Between 1978 and 1982, Johnson published a series of valuable articles on the Liberty Party in New England that stemmed from his 1976 Syracuse University dissertation. Since then Johnson expanded the scope of his research to include the entire North. The result is this deeply researched study of political abolitionism that now stands as the most comprehensive work on the Liberty Party. Without question, no one has devoted greater attention to the Liberty Party or made a better effort to review all the party's newspapers and relevant manuscript collections.

Johnson's book is chiefly a political history that focuses on elections, voters, coalition building, interparty fighting, and ideological fights waged by newspaper editors and platform committees.¹ Historians, he argues, have neglected the Liberty Party and consistently overemphasized the significance of William Lloyd Garrison and his followers, even though the Liberty Party's members vastly outnumbered the Garrisonians. While providing the party's national narrative, Johnson emphasizes complexity and conflict and devotes a large portion of the book to the vicissitudes of individual state Liberty organizations. Since the national party existed only when it held national conventions, Johnson explains that the party is better understood as a conglomeration of state parties, each of which operated independently.

Because it lacked access to patronage (which could have been used to reward and discipline its members), the Liberty Party may have been even more disputatious than the Whigs and Democrats. Libertyites generally eschewed disunionism and other Garrisonian ideas but their anti-slavery positions otherwise spread across a wide spectrum. Some Liberty supporters were moralists, and some wanted to link antislavery more closely to temperance. Some interpreted the constitution as a proslavery document; others saw it as an antislavery one and believed that the federal government could eliminate slavery everywhere. Some favored a coalition with antislavery Whigs and Democrats; others believed the

1. Johnson's brief and useful examination of women who participated in Liberty Party activities should be supplemented by Stacey M. Robertson's *Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010).

mainstream parties tainted by slavery and abhorred cooperation. Some hoped to appeal to more voters by expanding the platform to include issues besides slavery; others held zealously to the party defining itself by the “one idea.” Because ideological factionalism affected state organizations differently, Johnson’s decision to tell much of the party’s story from the view of the state parties—fifteen northern states plus Virginia—helps us understand the party better, even if it may not fulfill those readers desirous of a flowing narrative.

His state-by-state approach notwithstanding, Johnson discerns some broad trends within this fractured party. He demonstrates, for example, how the Liberty Party of the early 1840s differed from the increasingly coalition-minded body after 1844. Before 1844, former Whigs constituted about three-fourths of the Liberty Party’s membership. Johnson estimates after 1844, however, that former Democrats became dominant in New England, New York, Ohio, and possibly elsewhere. He surmises that this post-1844 shift occurred due to defections of northern Democrats arising from the Polk administration’s proslavery policies, a stronger antislavery tone to the northern Whig Party that minimized the Whigs’ antislavery defections, Democratic policy positions adopted by some prominent Libertyites, and the elevation, with Liberty support, of New Hampshire’s John P. Hale, an independent Democrat, to the United States Senate in 1846.

As some of the state and national Liberty leadership looked to unite with other antislavery politicians, a few individuals, such as Salmon Chase and Gamaliel Bailey, saw more promise of a partnership with the Democrats than with the Whigs. The Liberty Party’s most important move toward forming a broader antislavery coalition, though, came from its association with Hale. While not a member of the Liberty Party, Hale squarely opposed slavery extension and spoke before many Liberty gatherings in New England. After the national party nominated Hale for president in October 1847, it essentially accepted anti-extension as its creed and paved the way to joining the Free Soil coalition in 1848. By then, Johnson maintains, most of the party had abandoned political purity in the hope that they might have greater political influence. Some members of the Liberty Party, led by Gerrit Smith, rejected the Free Soil coalition and continued as a separate abolitionist political party after 1848, but Johnson’s narrative of the Liberty Party ends with the 1848 election.

Historians have long differed on whether the Liberty Party represented the first step toward the creation of the Republican Party. Vernon

L. Volpe, for example, contends that the Liberty Party died in 1848 and that it shared few continuities with the Free Soil and Republican parties that followed. Richard H. Sewell, in contrast, argues for the Free Soil and Republican parties' being the Liberty Party's successors.² Johnson sides with Sewell's position but recognizes that the Liberty Party's merging with the Free Soilers became easier once the party's majority rallied around Hale's presidential candidacy.

Historians will long be grateful to Johnson for creating lists of Liberty Party members who afterward held high political offices and for providing several valuable appendices, including election returns for statewide races that the Liberty Party contested and a sixty-page biographical directory of major Liberty Party figures. These election returns reveal that the party continued to grow, in most states, through 1846. They also offer the most explicit evidence of abolitionists' concentration in the upper North, particularly northern New England. States farthest removed from the South were "more insulated" (33) from slavery and racial conflict, which insulation, Johnson suggests, fostered the Liberty Party's growth. Johnson also notes the connection between New England settlement patterns and Liberty Party strength and attributes "isolated pockets of Liberty strength" (275) to dedicated and capable leadership. He places less emphasis on the Liberty Party's connection with antislavery churches than do some other authors, holding instead for the "diversity of religious sentiment" (224) within the party. Yet while Johnson acknowledges that the party's "most distinctive features" were "its high-toned moralism and religious orientation" (222), he neither looks deeply into the religious roots of that moralism nor explains why some white northerners embraced abolitionism when most did not. His view of the Liberty Party as an abolitionist confederacy of competing interests that differed from state to state, and within states, leads to his keeping of generalizations to a minimum.

Some historians have long declared William Lloyd Garrison to be overrated. Gilbert Hobbs Barnes held that Theodore Dwight Weld and other western abolitionists mattered more than Garrison. Theodore Clarke Smith and Dwight Lowell Dumond both maintained that the Lib-

2. Vernon L. Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest, 1838-1848* (Kent, OH, 1990); Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States* (New York, 1976).

erty Party was far more consequential than Garrisonianism.³ Johnson's book certainly presents the fullest argument for the Liberty Party's importance—and its centrality—to abolitionism.

JOHN W. QUIST is a professor of history at Shippensburg University. He is the author of *Restless Visionaries: The Social Roots of Antebellum Reform in Alabama and Michigan* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1998).

We Are the Revolutionists: German-Speaking Immigrants and American Abolitionists After 1848. By Mischa Honeck. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. Pp. 236. Cloth, \$69.95; paper \$24.95.)

Reviewed by David T. Gleeson

Mischa Honeck uses four fascinating case studies to illustrate the influence of radical German immigrants on antebellum American politics. Placing these immigrants in the context of their political coming of age in the tumultuous 1840s in the German states, Honeck vividly shows the continued importance of an Atlantic world of ideas beyond the 1820s. Of course the significance of Germans in the antebellum and Civil War eras has been recognized, and prominent migrants such as Carl Schurz have received serious attention. Honeck, however, seeks to look beyond the archetypal German American refugee success story to examine those who received a more mixed reaction in the United States and who themselves often became disappointed with the conservative nature of American society.

The first case study will be of particular interest to historians of the South. "A Firm Phalanx of Iron Souls: Free Men on Texas Soil," assesses just how radical Texas Germans were in the years before the Civil War. Texas did indeed admit a large number of German immigrants after 1848, many of them imbued with the values of the liberal revolutions. Honeck, as the subtitle of his book makes clear, focuses on the relationship between a German radical and a leading abolitionist, in this case Adolf Douai, editor of the *San Antonio Zeitung*, and renowned

3. Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830–1844* (New York, 1933), 174–75; Theodore Clarke Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Northwest* (Boston, 1897), 5, 33; Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1961), 299.