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*Confronting Slavery: Edward Coles and the Rise of  
Antislavery Politics in Nineteenth-Century America* by  
Suzanne Cooper Guasco (review)

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to the conscious motivations of Henry Ford and not enough to the political and economic priorities of the FMC. I would have liked to see Bates dissect the FMC's use of "allegiance" and "loyalty" in light of this perennial slip-page, one that I believe the company cultivated. Finally, even Bates's less sentimental treatment of Ford casts him as a bit too exceptional. While the FMC was certainly the largest employer of African Americans in Detroit, a few other industrialists had majority-black or integrated workforces. The "raised expectations" of African Americans during this period cannot be attributed primarily to the FMC, which was as embedded in the contradictory pulls of the racialized political economy as any other company. Ultimately, Bates's very readable study will be of enormous interest to historians of the urban and industrial Midwest, to scholars interested in racial formation in the region, and to those who study African American experiences.

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Suzanne Cooper Guasco, *Confronting Slavery: Edward Coles and the Rise of Antislavery Politics in Nineteenth-Century America*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013. 293 pp. \$28.95.

Suzanne Cooper Guasco's elegantly written study of Edward Coles, second governor of Illinois, proves that his life story merits historians' attention. Cooper Guasco has a gift for selecting diverting examples, and she adeptly depicts how throughout his long public life Coles battled sectionalism, sought national unity, and tirelessly argued that the United States' founders opposed slavery. Coles suffered for his convictions; his decision to abandon his Virginia planter birthright led to both economic and personal hardships, and he swam against the tide during a long political career. As the nation divided along sectional lines, Coles promoted gradual emancipation as the means to keep the country together—even as this seemed increasingly impossible.

Cooper Guasco argues that scholars have erred in only granting Coles minimal attention over the years. Generally, they have restricted their interest in him to his 1819 act of freeing his slaves and his role in keeping Illinois a free state during the 1820s. The standard narrative about Coles is of a minor and inconsistent politician who, apart from these few accom-

plishments, was insignificant to the larger discussion of slavery and emancipation. In contrast, Cooper Guasco claims that Coles has been “underappreciated” as a longtime politician and an actor against slavery and that he was a “pragmatic and innovative, if not always effective, politician” (5). After a lucid introduction, Cooper Guasco details Coles’s early years, the origins of his antislavery convictions at the College of William and Mary, and his service as James Madison’s private secretary in the White House. Coles’s experiences both in the U.S. capital and overseas confirmed his desire to abolish slavery in his own household and beyond. The author notes how Coles adeptly used his personal networks—both those into which he was born in the Virginia political elite and the expanded ones he built in Washington. Cooper Guasco’s broad scope reveals how her subject blended older tactics of allying with elite acquaintances with the more populist methods that were beginning to characterize western politics.

The author also stakes a claim for Coles in antislavery historiography, especially its political branch. To Cooper Guasco, he represents continuity from the early national era through the 1860s, and in the process she takes part in an ongoing discussion about political tactics. Scholars are increasingly willing to question their assumptions about the timing and boundaries of political abolition, and Cooper Guasco situates Coles as a bridge between the early national and Civil War eras, arguing that he innovated by using the founders’ “legacy” to promote moderate antislavery (8). In the process, Cooper Guasco’s book places the Midwest at the center of the national debate over slavery and freedom. Coles interpreted the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 as meaning that the federal government had excluded slavery in the Old Northwest and could legally do so. The author thus locates the region at the center of national political concerns.

As governor, Coles followed his principles into a hard fight against slavery but was also willing to engage with antiblack arguments as he pursued his antislavery goal. After serving as governor, Coles became increasingly interested in colonization and took his same message about the founders’ gradual abolition legacy to Virginia and to national politics. After Nat Turner’s insurrection, which in Coles’s view proved the need for emancipation in the Old Dominion and beyond, other politicians repeatedly stymied him. He was also increasingly frustrated by the mid-1830s with the radical abolitionists, who he believed disrupted partisan and national unity. Over the next thirty years, again and again Coles found disappointment in his fellow politicians, but he fought on. Coles used the press and public

appearances to push politicians in the Free Soil and Republican parties to take federal action against slavery—as he claimed the founders had wanted. By the 1850s, positions that he had earlier deemed “moderate” had become contested terrain (213). Coles maintained an unwavering commitment to the idea that all regions of the country, including the South, had to oppose slavery in order to bring about emancipation.

While the book has a consistent and clearly explained argument and is thoroughly researched, a few of its claims could use more documentation, particularly Coles’s racial views. Coles’s desire to see the nation fulfill its “political and social ideals” through emancipation motivated his public actions, but he was willing to cooperate with people who held substantially different views than did he, in terms of both partisanship and race (9). At the end of this history, Coles’s racial views remain a bit murky, and the author’s treatment of them is perhaps overly optimistic. Certainly the fact that Coles freed his slaves gives persuasive proof of his views on African Americans’ capabilities. Nevertheless, some of the evidence about Cole and race is more ambiguous, for even as he regarded slavery as an unparalleled sin and blot on the nation’s conscience, his willingness to ally himself with people who held strongly antiblack views deserves more probing, particularly in terms of his involvement with the colonization movement. Cooper Guasco asserts that Coles’s experiences with racism in Illinois convinced him that emancipation would be unlikely to lead to racial harmony, and he therefore had to make substantial compromises. Here, it would have been useful had she quoted Coles himself about his reasons for allying with people who held antiblack views, as did many colonizationists. Coles compromised on the issue of racial prejudice through his alliances with the American Colonization Society, but why he did so could use more explanation.

Near the end of Coles’s life, his son Roberts died in battle wearing a Confederate uniform, even as African Americans and the Republican party finally brought about emancipation. Coles remained pessimistic about the rights that African Americans would be able to claim in the postwar nation, as seen in his donation to the American Colonization Society in his 1865 will. This exemplifies Cooper Guasco’s depiction of Coles as a complicated figure, both pragmatic and an idealist, and certainly one whose complex biography is of value to historians of slavery and politics.

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