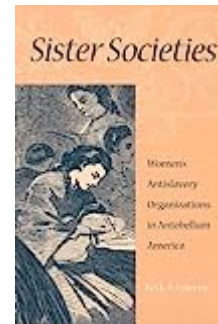


Beth A. Salerno. *Sister Societies: Women's Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005. ix + 233 pp. \$ 38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-338-8.



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Published on H-SHEAR (May, 2006)

American Women and the Crusade against Slavery

In her *Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States*, abolitionist Angelina Grimké urged northern white women to protest the institution of slavery. By the time Grimké published her work in 1837 thousands of northern women were already organizing female antislavery societies. According to Beth Salerno, women established over two hundred such societies between 1832 and 1855 (p. 3). The earliest ones emerged in the New England and mid-Atlantic states and helped to spawn women's antislavery organizations in the West during the 1840s and early 1850s.

Salerno's monograph succinctly documents the major leaders and activities of these organizations and also explores the principle issues that fractured their unity in the 1840s and led to their demise after the mid 1850s. Building on the rich scholarship of numerous historians, especially Debra Gold Hansen, Anne Boylan, Julie Roy Jeffrey, and Lori Ginzburg, Salerno expands our knowledge of female antislavery organizations during the antebellum period.[1] Like Linda Kerber and Nancy Isenberg, she also views the concept of antebellum citizenship as a fluid and expansive category, one that included women,

despite their lack of the franchise.[2]

Salerno's first chapter focuses on the period from 1760 to 1831 to discuss how women's involvement in benevolent reform work, the American Colonization Society, literary societies, and free-produce organizations that urged the boycott of slave-made goods shaped the formation of the first independent women's antislavery societies. The next several chapters detail the activities and leaders of these latter societies during the 1830s. Salerno focuses on various female antislavery societies to convey the diversity of women's abolitionist activities as well as their successes in networking and mentoring. She also offers an excellent discussion of how women used antislavery fairs, national conventions, sewing societies, and petitioning campaigns to mobilize northern public opinion against the "peculiar institution."

Through such activities, argues Salerno, antislavery women began to blur the lines between moral and political action. Female antislavery organizations challenged Americans to redefine and expand their notions of political action, citizenship, and women's appropriate sphere. A citizen was not only a man who exercised his right to

vote but also a woman who campaigned against slavery.

According to Salerno, “antislavery women were actually pioneering a modern understanding of politics [by] using petitions to lobby legislators, and raising funds to support the newspapers and lectures that would create an educated, active citizenry” (p. 75). Although many women activists regularly invoked idealized views of womanhood to justify their work, a growing minority also asserted their right to protest against slavery because they were citizens. An 1836 address by the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia, for example, boldly declared: “Yes, although we are *women*, we still are citizens” (p. 74).

The antislavery activities of women caused an angry backlash in antebellum America. Salerno discusses the mob violence in Philadelphia in May 1838, when female abolitionists were harassed and even pelted with stones while trying to meet in the newly opened Pennsylvania Hall (this antislavery building was quickly burned down by anti-abolitionist men). The author also discusses how many clergymen’s resentment of activist, independent women and fear of abolitionism caused them to condemn not only high profile abolitionists such as the Grimké@s but also female antislavery organizers in general.

Salerno pays close attention to the 1837-1840 period to document the internal divisions that fractured women’s antislavery societies. The first and most controversial issue was that concerning women’s appropriate role in the movement. Was it acceptable for women to engage in openly political activities such as lecturing, parading, and petitioning, or should they limit themselves to participating in antislavery sewing societies and other activities deemed suitably feminine? When the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1840 invited women to join as equal members, female abolitionists faced a tough choice: disband their organizations and join the male-dominated national one or soldier on in their separate, independent societies. Other issues that roiled female antislavery organizations included how to interact with African Americans, including black women who sought equal membership in predominantly white female abolitionist societies; how to respond to the growing public opprobrium against abolitionists, especially the mob violence; and how to deal with the increasingly troubled relationship between churches and the antislavery movement.

While discussing the above issues, Salerno offers brief but incisive portraits of individual female antislavery advocates. She focuses on the author Lydia Maria

Child, for example, to explore women abolitionists who rejected the continuation of separate female antislavery organizations. “Female conventions and societies,” stated Child, “always seemed to me like half a pair of scissors” (p. 96). Salerno also uses Child to illustrate women activists’ growing weariness and frustration with the contentiousness of the antislavery movement. In 1843 a dispirited Child wrote that she was “weary, weary” of the “bad spirit” abolitionists repeatedly showed towards one another. They were too busily engaged in an “everlasting pulling down, and no building up” (p. 122).

Salerno discusses not only well-known women abolitionists but also less famous but important figures such as Juliana Tappan, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, and Mary Parker. The author also focuses on female black abolitionists such as Grace Douglass, Margaretta Forten, and Susan Paul to examine the development of African-American female antislavery societies and their interaction with their white counterparts. Finally Salerno uses the British Quaker abolitionist Elizabeth Heyrick as a focal point to discuss the transatlantic connections between British and American antislavery movements.

Salerno’s closing chapter focuses on the 1840s and early 1850s to examine the emergence of numerous women’s antislavery societies in the West. Unfortunately by the early 1850s the same issues that had divided women’s organizations back East fractured those out West. The author notes that many female antislavery societies in the East were losing momentum and even disbanding by the late 1840s. Salerno points out that many women activists increasingly turned their attention to helping fugitive slaves, especially after passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. The coming of the Civil War propelled many antislavery women to form the Women’s National Loyal League and to urge passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, ending slavery.

Salerno has scoured various archival sources, including the annual reports of numerous antislavery societies, the private papers and published writings of leading abolitionists, and various antislavery newspapers and journals. Her appendix helpfully lists the female antislavery societies she discusses, their place of origin, and the years of their founding and disbanding.

Sister Societies is a thoroughly researched, cogently argued, and tightly focused book. Yet there are shortcomings. The book is too segmented. Each chapter contains various divisions, many of which might have been integrated into one seamless narrative. Toward the end of her study Salerno raises but does not adequately discuss

why the majority of female antislavery societies in the East as well as the West dissolved. This reader wished, for example, that Salerno had elaborated on her suggestion that women who left female antislavery societies in the 1850s did so because they sought to “abolitionize” their churches or became active in the women’s suffrage struggle or the Free Soil and later the Republican parties (pp. 149-150). Although the book is generally well written, Salerno repeatedly stated that women “felt” this way or that about a particular issue. It would have been more accurate to note what women thought, believed, stated, argued, or asserted.

These criticisms aside, Beth Salerno has written a substantive work of scholarship, one that deepens our understanding of women’s involvement in antebellum reform, especially the antislavery movement.

Notes

[1]. Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); Anne M. Boylan, *The Origins of Women’s Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Lori D. Ginzburg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[2]. Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998); Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

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Citation: Myra Glenn. Review of Salerno, Beth A., *Sister Societies: Women’s Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. May, 2006.

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