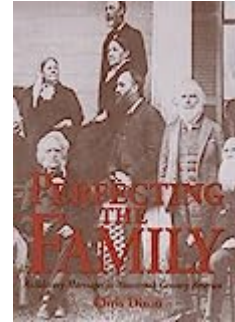


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Chris Dixon. *Perfecting the Family: Antislavery Marriages in Nineteenth-Century America.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. xiii + 322 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-068-0.



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In *Perfecting the Family*, Chris Dixon disputes the suggestion that radical abolitionists were an “imbalanced or disturbed minority.” He highlights how this group of activists drew upon and were sustained by prevailing nineteenth-century ideologies of domesticity. At the same time, he explores the reconceptions of marriage and the family advocated by these reformers. By making clear the deep-seated interconnections between their public activism and private life choices, Dixon provides a rich insight into the breadth of the abolitionists’ challenge to antebellum society. He also makes more visible the limits to that activism, suggesting that abolitionism marked both the radical potential and the conservative boundaries of nineteenth-century reform.

Dixon’s research is based in a close study of eight abolitionist marriages. His sample includes James and Lucretia Mott, Henry and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Theodore and Angelina Grimke Weld, Stephen and Abby Kelley Foster, David Lee and L. Maria Child, Wendell and Ann Phillips, William Lloyd and Helen Garrison and Henry Blackwell and Lucy Stone—all white, prominent, Garrisonian abolitionists. This limited sample focuses this study by enabling an in-depth analysis of the marriage relations of a few particularly well-documented activists. However, it would also prove terribly limiting had Dixon not gone to extensive lengths to contextualize his analyses in

the secondary literature on abolitionists generally. While occasionally reaching further than his sources may really permit, Dixon is usually quite convincing when he applies his conclusions to a wider circle of abolitionists, both black and white.

Dixon posits that conceptions of the family and gender relations stood at the center of the debate over slavery. Chapter one supports that contention through an examination of portrayals of the southern family in anti-slavery literature. A den of iniquity, peopled with lecherous slaveowners, long-suffering white wives, sexually-abused slave women and disempowered slave fathers, the South appears in this literature to be the very antithesis of the northern, moral, republican family. Dixon notes, along with many others, that this linking of antislavery activism with moral reform expanded the support base for emancipation. However, Dixon continues with the interesting implication that abolitionists used the southern family as a negative reference group against which to measure their own familial relations and those of northern society. Denouncing the abuses of power apparently rampant in patriarchal southern households, radical abolitionists were drawn into challenging the asymmetrical power distribution in northern marriage relations as well.

The radical abolitionists’ attempts to reform marital relations necessarily involved addressing the question of

separate spheres and woman's role. Nineteenth-century domestic writers lauded women's moral capacity, encouraging them to make their homes a pure retreat in which men could escape the corrupting influences of partisan politics and economic competition. Dixon makes clear that even the most radical reformers adhered to significant portions of this ideology, particularly the inherent moral nature of women and the revered status of home and family. This linked them to the broader society and limited the extent of their radicalism. Yet this group of abolitionists also felt great ambiguity, since they recognized women's exclusion from the public sphere contributed to her second-class status both within and outside of marriage. Dixon suggests that only by looking at how abolitionists attempted to address these competing concerns can scholars truly understand the extent of the abolitionists' challenges to nineteenth-century society.

While the first two chapters are broad overviews, chapters three and six focus more narrowly on the domestic arrangements and marital experiences of Dixon's chosen group of Garrisonian abolitionists. In these chapters Dixon makes most clear the connections between these radicals' public and personal reform efforts, especially the ways in which they politicized private choices and brought questions of private behavior into the realm of public discourse. The household organization of many of the studied marriages highlights how tension over gender roles forced abolitionists to confront at home the implications of their public reform activities. Dixon sees these radicals as caught between a legal system and a domestic ideology which limited female autonomy, and a moral cause which required public female participation. In perhaps the best use of his sources in the book, Dixon carefully traces how different married couples chose to balance the questions of responsibility to the family and responsibility to the cause, resulting in very different household arrangements. Dixon also makes clear the highly fluid nature of gender roles for these radicals, as some men took on nursing or childcare roles while women entered into public speaking. In chapter six, Dixon integrates a study of sexuality, tracing the ways in which abolitionists created intimacy in their marriages. Dixon suggests that since abolitionists saw sexuality as central to the evils of slavery, they were forced to reevaluate the power balance in their own intimate relations.

Chapters four and five provide excellent companion chapters to those above by moving out beyond antislavery marriages to explore female sorority and masculinity. In harmony with previous studies of sorority and women's culture, Dixon finds that women drew

strength and a sense of community from their relationships with other women. These provided both public and private support as abolitionist women moved beyond traditional female roles. Dixon also agrees that these friendships were limited—they tended not to cross race or class lines, and they were subordinated to the necessities of women's marriages. Dixon posits that abolitionist women also found support and community within cross-gender support networks, developing strong and long-lasting friendships with men other than their husbands. He suggests that this both reflected and may have aided abolitionist women's pressure on the ideology of separate spheres, and enabled them to move somewhat more easily between an all-female and a mostly-male world. Women were not the only gender to face rapidly shifting public and private roles in this time period. Dixon contributes to the growing literature on masculinity by examining how the public interactions of men and women, changes in men's domestic roles, and the warm relationships between abolitionist men resulted in new understandings of masculinity. The chapter provides interesting explorations of competing conceptions of masculinity in this time period, including the Southern focus on chivalry and honor, black abolitionists' militancy, and political abolitionists' focus on the male rituals of voting. After exploring male Garrisonians' efforts to avoid adopting each of the above definitions, Dixon suggests that Garrisonians ended up participating in a "reluctant masculinization" of antislavery activity during the 1850s.

Summarizing *Perfecting the Family* for a book review presents two major challenges. First, while Dixon's overarching points are clear and frequently stated (such as his desire to integrate reformers' public and private lives), the connections between those key themes and the vast amount of information in the book are frequently left quite unclear. Second, although Dixon does not claim this as his intent, *Perfecting the Family* clearly takes on the challenge of pulling together the major historiographical issues of studies of the nineteenth century. In the course of exploring the interrelations between radical abolitionists and the rest of antebellum society, Dixon touches upon studies of companionate marriage, women's culture, masculinity, sexuality, republicanism, slave narratives, Southern religion, separate spheres, American exceptionalism, the market revolution, dress reform, women's political culture, the free produce movement, exercise reform, women doctors, nativism, the frontier, non-violence, and free love. Researchers of abolition have long understood the necessity of connecting abolition to the "sisterhood of reforms"

which grew up around and from it, but Dixon is unusual in his attempt to link all of these reforms to changing conceptions of domesticity and family relations. While admirable and highly suggestive for future work, this attempt does not wholly succeed, as the reader is frequently left wandering about trying to refind the main argument. An organizational style that packs a very large number of points into each small section, and a writing style that moves too rapidly from the tiny example to the huge generalization also make it more difficult to follow the connections between these various aspects of the argument. On the other hand, Dixon's footnotes provide access to the rich array of literature on these topics, and a more international array than is usually found since Dixon relies more heavily on British and Australian literatures than most American historians. Thus, those who wish to follow his lead in attempting to pull together disparate aspects of studies on abolition have a well-marked road map to assist them.

One topic that fails to appear frequently in the book is the question of race, a seemingly odd omission given the fundamental importance of the topic to abolitionists. Dixon does examine abolitionist support for interracial marriage, and is sensitive to differences in ideology and tactics between black and white abolitionists. He also mentions the hard balance abolitionists had to strike between recognizing the centrality of family to slaves and still portraying them as the victims of a family-destroying economic system. However, in many ways the issue of slavery, and even of antislavery, recedes into the back-

ground of the book, in order to foreground questions of the domestic ideology, arrangements, and compromises of white antislavery activists. While this makes for potentially odd reading for those steeped in the antislavery literature, it does strongly support Dixon's attempt to provide a new angle on antislavery activists. It also strengthens his contentions that abolitionists faced many of the same issues as other nineteenth-century reformers, in their efforts to blend public responsibility and individual life choices, and in their contradictory support for and challenge to gender conventions.

Should it need saying clearly, this is without a doubt a book worth reading, particularly for those interested in the antislavery movement, in the shifting conceptions of public and private spheres, or in the history of the family. It also provides important chapters for those researching the history of women's culture, masculinity or sexuality. In addition, it is a fascinating read for those concerned with how to balance public responsibilities with private life. The balancing act engaged in by abolitionists will seem quite familiar to two-career households today, and their frank and open conversations about both public and domestic responsibilities offer many relevant insights. As Dixon notes, in some ways abolitionists were "atypical of their times, but prototypical of the future" (p. 49).

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