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[Review of the Book *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] The intellectual core of *The Trials of Anthony Burns* explores the connection between Ralph Waldo Emerson and the New England Transcendentalists and the abolitionist cause. Ideas effect social life, von Frank insists, and he examines that point in a rich analysis that weaves intellectual, religious, political, and cultural perspectives into a sophisticated and detailed narrative. Emersonians came to embrace abolitionist activity as a central component of their philosophical idealism, particularly during the 1850s. In an interesting way, the Burns case called upon many of New England's social and cultural elites to rethink their understanding of the relationship between idea and action, much as, two decades earlier, Charles Grandison Finney's revivals encouraged many to re-imagine the play between private morality and public life.

Keywords

Anthony Burns, slavery, Boston, abolitionists

Disciplines

African American Studies | Labor Relations | United States History

Comments

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The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston. By Albert J. von Frank (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1998) 409 pp. \$27.95

The story of Anthony Burns, the fugitive slave, has been told many times before. The tale of his rendition to slavery, and the effect of his case upon the citizens of Boston and the nation, were the subject of ten or more volumes in the decades immediately following the 1854 event. More recently, the case received attention from a popular historical writer, as well as in more scholarly efforts, and has since become a staple of most textbook treatments of abolition and antebellum reform.¹ Why another volume? Despite all that has been written, von Frank's presentation of this event is the most sweeping, complex, and multidimensional yet to appear.

1 Truman Nelson, *The Sin of the Prophet* (Boston, 1952); Jane Pease, *The Fugitive Slave Law and Anthony Burns: A Problem in Law Enforcement* (Philadelphia, 1975).

The intellectual core of *The Trials of Anthony Burns* explores the connection between Ralph Waldo Emerson and the New England Transcendentalists and the abolitionist cause. Ideas effect social life, von Frank insists, and he examines that point in a rich analysis that weaves intellectual, religious, political, and cultural perspectives into a sophisticated and detailed narrative. Emersonians came to embrace abolitionist activity as a central component of their philosophical idealism, particularly during the 1850s. In an interesting way, the Burns case called upon many of New England's social and cultural elites to rethink their understanding of the relationship between idea and action, much as, two decades earlier, Charles Grandison Finney's revivals encouraged many to re-imagine the play between private morality and public life.

Yet, it was a convoluted understanding that developed. In the poems of Walt Whitman, as in the political activity of Monroe Conway and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, abolition often attracted whites from a fear that compromises with slavery would reduce *them* to a servile state vis-à-vis the South. In the process, "slavery threatened to become a thing that happens to white people" (258). The key to this attitude among abolitionists lay in the nature of a political discourse the very linguistic assumptions of which banished black Americans from the conversation. Thus, a tone of paternalism and condescension permeated the writings and speeches of these abolitionists; they could rarely imagine blacks actively engaging in politics themselves. Despite von Frank's important effort to understand these limitations in their context—to consider how "an approach so self-centered . . . can be a legitimate style of caring" (220)—these attitudes remain a topic for further analysis.

In this context, the one weakness in this otherwise superb book becomes apparent. The two major centers of Massachusetts abolition, Boston and Worcester, contained small but intensely active black communities, organized around a handful of churches and deeply involved in all aspects of abolitionist activity. Although von Frank introduces Lewis Hayden, Boston's black leader, to good effect in places, nonetheless, black voices are generally absent from this historical account of the the contemporary political discourse. To have explored those parallel worlds in greater detail would have been of immense interest. But, withal, *The Trials of Anthony Burns* is unquestionably a rich and important book both for its creative, interdisciplinary methodology as for its presentation of the labyrinthine meanings of the historical event itself.

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