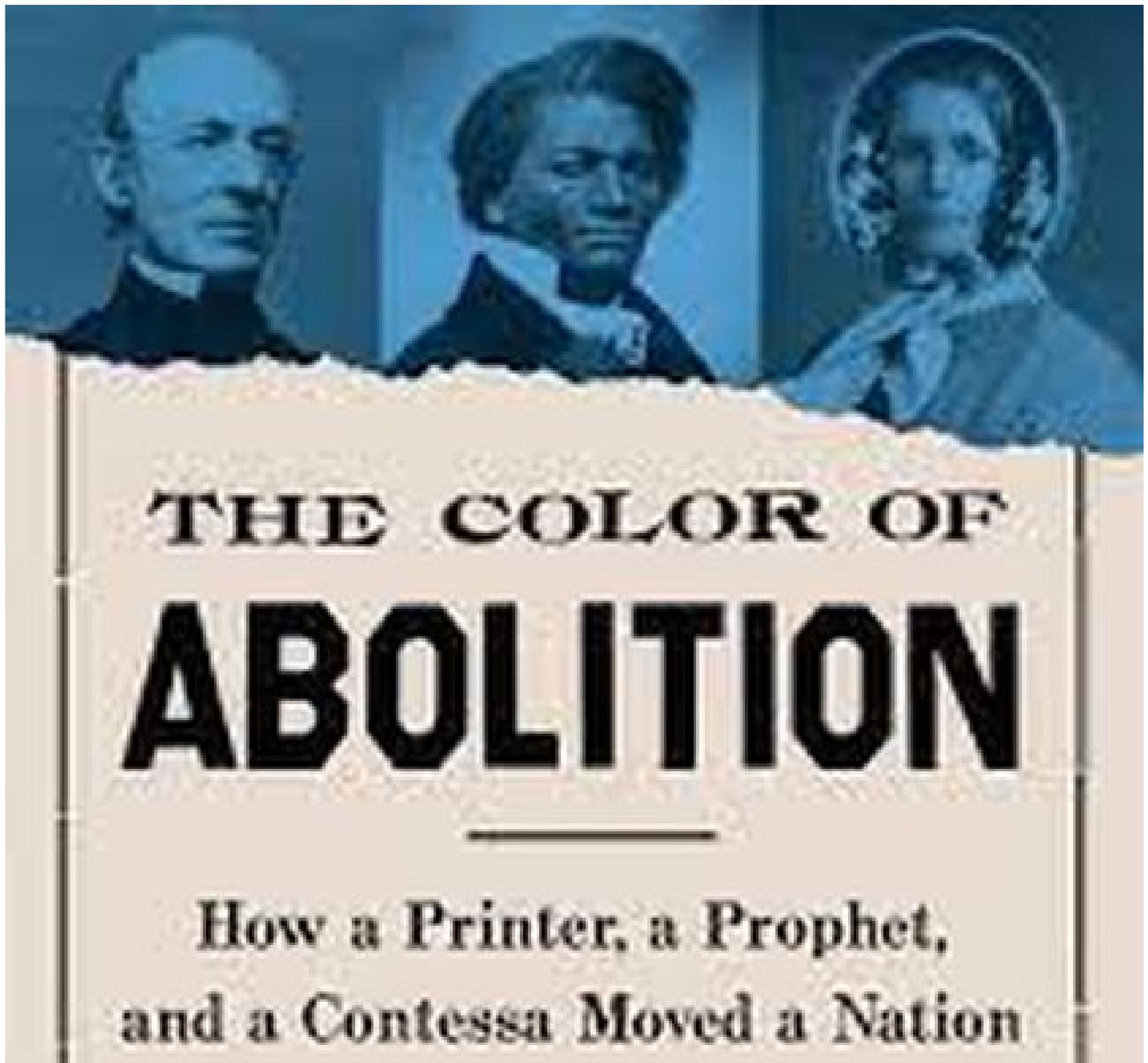
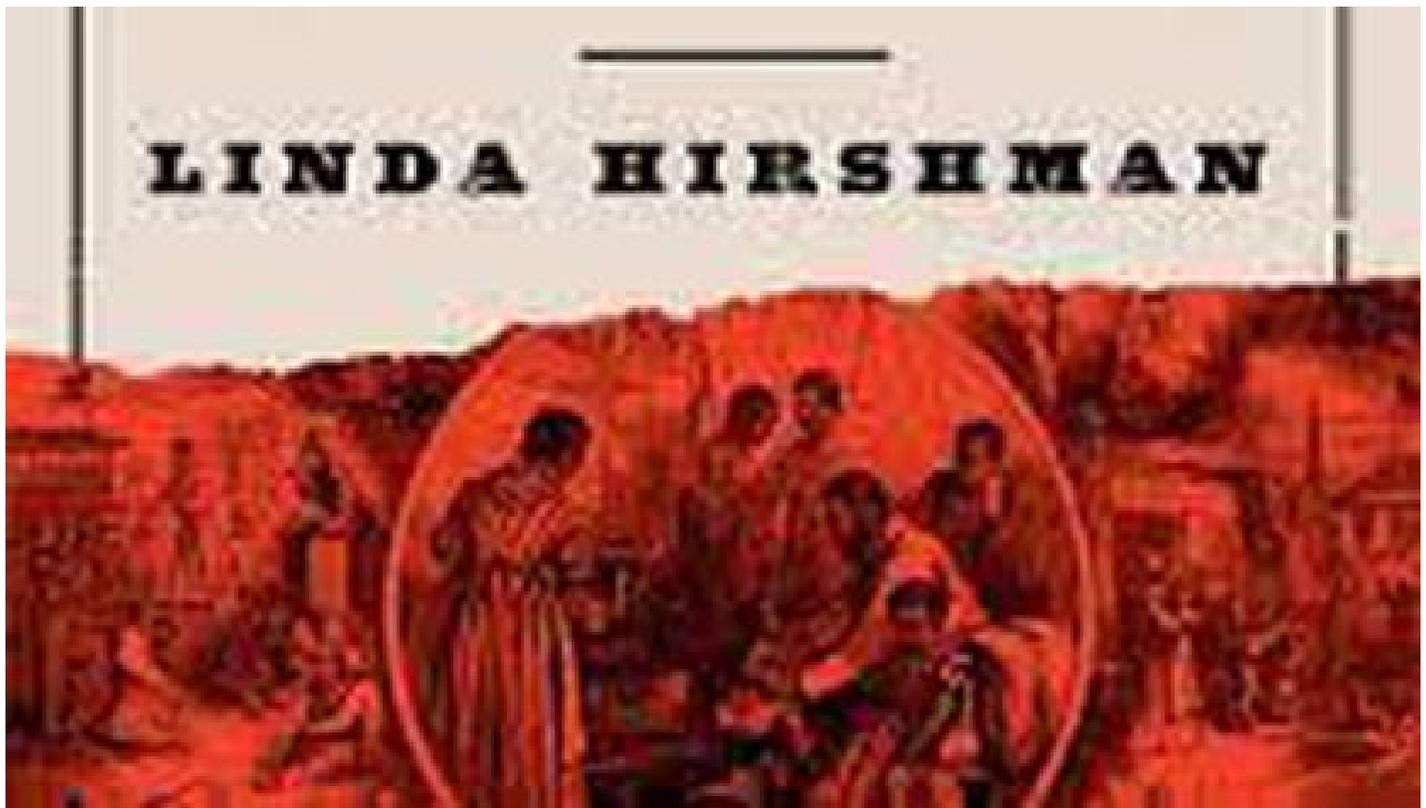


BOOK REVIEW

Linda Hirshman's 'The Color of Abolition,' chronicles infighting among reformers in the abolition movement

By **Lydia Moland** Globe Correspondent, Updated February 3, 2022, 4:43 p.m.





HANDOUT

Linda Hirshman is a historian of social movements. Her previous books document the struggle for gay rights, against sexual harassment, and for labor reform. But her most recent book, [“The Color of Abolition: How a Printer, a Prophet, and a Contessa Moved a Nation,”](#) turns to the most important one of all: the movement to end slavery. “No social movement in American history matters more than abolition,” she writes. It was an “astonishing historical achievement, and a crucial landmark of moral progress.”

And what a movement it was. Its leaders were towering. There was William Lloyd Garrison, the fire-breathing editor whose Boston-based newspaper “The Liberator” unleashed irrefutable moral arguments that converted masses of apathetic Northerners to the cause. Then there was Frederick Douglass, whose harrowing accounts of his own enslavement galvanized masses more, catapulting him to international fame.

These men are the printer and prophet of Hirshman’s title; their stories, she acknowledges, have been amply and recently told. But others have been neglected, among them the brilliant and imposing Maria Weston Chapman. Weston Chapman, whose admirers labeled her “the Contessa,” brought Boston Brahmin connections, a

posse of five younger sisters, and stunning organizational talent to the antislavery cause.

She organized speaking tours for the movement's orators. She ran the antislavery society's wildly successful holiday fair, raising immense sums that paid the society's bills. She turned her home into a hub of abolitionist activity, churning out antislavery petitions and building the female solidarity necessary to support emerging women activists like Lydia Maria Child, Sarah and Angelina Grimké, and Abby Kelley. Weston Chapman kept up a voluminous correspondence through which she micromanaged allies from New York to London. She edited an antislavery publication simply called "Right and Wrong in Boston." Her influence over Garrison was widely noted. Her enemies called her Lady Macbeth.

The trio's combined talents were formidable. Garrison wrote; Douglass spoke; Weston Chapman managed it all. Their alliance, which spanned class, race, and gender, felt unprecedented. Would it hold?

For a few glorious years, it did. But, as Hirshman deftly documents, purity of principle can generate its own intolerance. Garrison was convinced that only apolitical nonresistance could end slavery. Weston Chapman agreed. But Douglass became disillusioned with the movement's slow progress and with Weston Chapman's domineering. When other abolitionists turned to political engagement and physical resistance as tools in the antislavery struggle, Douglass joined them. Garrison and Weston Chapman were appalled. Soon Douglass himself became one of their targets.

Hirshman shows that the problem was not only ideological. Even committed abolitionists often harbored deep racial prejudice. In their struggle against Douglass, Weston Chapman and her correspondents frequently deployed racist stereotypes. Letters raced up and down the coast describing Douglass — a prolific writer with a punishing speaking schedule — as lazy, crafty, and greedy. Racist language was used as well, although Hirshman's wording sometimes leaves unclear who intentionally used this language and

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Hirshman turns these epistolary spats into page-turning reading, revealing backbiting and pettiness more at home in a teenage clique than in a moral crusade. As a master rhetorician, Douglass gave as good as he got. The attacks became both more public and more personal. When Douglass allowed English allies to purchase his freedom, liberating him from the threat of recapture, Garrisonians complained that he had compromised his principles. When they could not win their argument on its merits, they repeated damaging gossip about Douglass's marriage.

Douglass was not Weston Chapman's only victim. Hirshman only briefly intimates how her self-righteous bullying helped destroy the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and drove other allies out of the movement. Among these was Lydia Maria Child, whose abolitionist credentials did not save her when Weston Chapman concluded that Child was insufficiently loyal to Garrison and forced her out. These uncompromising tactics contributed to a devastating split in the abolitionist movement. Garrisonian apolitical nonresistants went one way; those wanting to fight abolition through politics went the other. The feuding raged as millions of humans remained enslaved in the South.

In the end, Hirshman concludes that Douglass's break with the Garrisonians had a bright side. During the Civil War, it positioned Douglass where history needed him most: where he could influence his president. As the war dragged on and Lincoln faced challenges from within his party, he called on Douglass to advise him. Douglass's political connections, unthinkable under his alliance with Garrison and Weston Chapman, allowed him to shape Lincoln's thinking on issues from Black soldiers to Black suffrage.

The book leaves the impression that only Douglass fought on after the war began. In Weston Chapman's case, this appears true. But Garrison, despite his pacifism, actively supported Lincoln during the war; after emancipation, he fought for racial reckoning, women's suffrage, and immigrant rights. For two of Hirshman's trio, anyway, the alliance was over but the work continued.

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Hirshman's book is a wonderful cataloging of Americans, white and Black, who devoted their lives to ending slavery. As [Ibram X. Kendi partners with The Boston Globe to launch a new version of Garrison's "Liberator"](#), it reminds us of Boston's centrality to the abolitionist movement. It offers a sobering reminder of the prejudice that often pollutes white activism. In our uncertain political moment, it shows how Americans historically reacted to a moral emergency. It should not surprise us that they brought their faults as well as their talents to the struggle. Perhaps their imperfect example can help us do better.

THE COLOR OF ABOLITION: How a Printer, a Prophet, and a Contessa Moved a Nation

By Linda Hirshman

Mariner Books, 330 pages, \$28

Lydia Moland teaches philosophy at Colby College. Her biography of abolitionist Lydia Maria Child will be published in the fall.

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