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The Confessions of Edward Isham: A Poor White Life of the Old South, by Edward Isham, edited by Charles C. Bolton and Scott P. Culclasure

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the “givens” of voter attitudes and beliefs to fashion political machines capable of winning elections and legislating policies. These are certainly important matters, matters that have often been overlooked or ignored by recent trends in historiography, but they do not constitute the whole of American political history. The farther one reads in Holt’s work, the more America and the American people seem to recede from view.

Holt’s history of the Whigs, the fruit of many long hard years of research and writing, is an important work. But it is also self-indulgent. It raises real questions for historians, editors, and publishers about how history should be communicated to the profession and the public. The form of this work will limit its impact. Some of us may wish that a more comprehensive history of the Whig party will one day be written, but no one should ever wish for a longer one.

LAWRENCE FREDERICK KOHL
University of Alabama

PAUL GOODMAN. *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 1998. Pp. xxi, 303. \$35.00.

In an article she wrote for the *Journal of Negro History* (1964), historian Betty Fladeland posed the question: “Who were the Abolitionists?” Nearly thirty years later, historians still strive to understand this fascinating and diverse group of women and men who committed themselves to the movement for racial equality and the end of slavery. In this book, Paul Goodman explores the factors that motivated some white abolitionists to reject the colonization movement during the early nineteenth-century in favor of the more radical and explicitly antiracist immediatist abolition movement.

Grounded in his expertise in nineteenth-century U.S. religious history, Goodman links the evangelical dimension of the development of the immediatist antislavery agenda and the changing economic face of the United States. The basic problem the author addresses is the emphasis historians have placed on the evangelical Christian roots of abolitionism. Although evangelicals promoted the immediate eradication of sin, Goodman finds that not all evangelical Christians supported the antiracist agenda of these abolitionists or their critique of market capitalism. In fact, the mainstream Protestant denominations clung to colonization as the safest, least controversial way to end slavery in the United States. The colonization movement had advocated the gradual deportation of free blacks to Africa and was founded on the idea that blacks and whites could never live harmoniously in the United States. Abolitionism, by contrast, pushed for both ending the slave institution and race prejudice, which immediatists insisted lay at the root of slavery.

The greatest strength of this study is that the author provides a wider theoretical and methodological

framework with which to understand the moral foundations of abolitionist sentiment. Social and economic circumstances facilitated the transformation of former supporters of colonization, like William Lloyd Garrison, to immediate abolitionism. Goodman underscores the influence of black abolitionists on conversion of their white colleagues. Interracial cooperation convinced many white antislavery proponents of the racist underpinnings of the colonization movement and of U.S. society at large.

The emerging market revolution was an important force that provided the context for the creation of a broad-based movement that included a larger proportion of men from the “laboring classes” than previously thought as well as more prosperous northern free blacks and whites. Wealthy men from the north, Goodman contends, tended to identify with southern white slaveholders in their opposition to the radical abolitionist agenda. According to immediatists, slavery served as the ultimate symbol of a system of oppression by an aristocratic class that promoted white indolence and self-indulgence in material luxuries that market capitalism had produced.

The weakest part of the book is the section on women abolitionists. Although the author devotes a chapter of the book to women abolitionists as a necessary part of the story of the abolitionist movement, there is little that is new here. The author relies primarily on the classic texts on women abolitionists that were published in the late 1970s and 1980s. As a result, the participation of women in the abolitionist rank and file is not as fully developed as the analysis of white abolitionist men.

Published five years after his death in October 1995, Goodman’s book is a valuable study that helps explain how the concept of racial equality became an integral part of radical abolitionism and the consequent divisions that took place among white evangelicals. By laying out a broader socioeconomic and religious context for understanding the abolitionist movement and the abolitionists themselves, Goodman illuminates the fact that this “radical” movement was intimately connected to larger religious and economic forces occurring in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century.

SHIRLEY J. YEE
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CHARLES C. BOLTON and SCOTT P. CULCLASURE, editors. *The Confessions of Edward Isham: A Poor White Life of the Old South*. Foreword by J. WILLIAM HARRIS. Athens: University of Georgia Press. 1998. Pp. xxii, 192. \$18.00.

In this collection, editors Charles C. Bolton and Scott P. Culclasure have provided students of nineteenth-century America with a provocative if admittedly atypical glimpse into the often obscure world of the very poorest whites of the Old South. Centered around a rare first-person account of the life of a common

laborer in the antebellum South (in the form of the brief autobiography that Edward Isham dictated to his attorney as he awaited trial for murder in 1860), this book also contains a valuable introduction and six thoughtful essays written by scholars specializing in the study of the Old South's plain folk.

Isham, the subject of the autobiography and the central figure in the accompanying essays, was a transient white laborer who spent most of his thirty-two years drinking, gambling, womanizing, and fighting. Born in Georgia's upper Piedmont, Isham roamed about the antebellum South, and especially its hill-country region, working as a ditch and well digger, a gold miner, a farm laborer, and a rail splitter. Isham claimed three wives (but no formal divorces), as well as countless mistresses and other temporary sexual partners, and he left behind a string of "fatherless" children for whom he apparently felt neither emotional attachment nor financial responsibility. Isham's disdain for steady work and his fondness for drinking, gambling, and womanizing provided him ample opportunity to engage in his favorite pastime: fighting. Isham's involvement in over sixty fights, and his general, but hardly unblemished, record of success therein, affirmed his self-conception of "manliness" but left the communities he passed through convinced Isham was at best a troublesome rogue and at worst a dangerous thug. In fact, Isham lived a good portion of his adulthood on the lam from criminal charges growing out of his penchant for assault. Isham's life of senseless violence came to an end only when he was executed by the state of North Carolina for the murder of James Cornelius, a prosperous yeoman farmer in Catawba County, where Isham worked as a "ditcher" for several months before stabbing Cornelius in a dispute over wages.

Identifying the reality of Isham's life as the material from which legends of "poor white trash" are made, J. William Harris's thoughtful introduction cautions readers not to view Isham as typical of the antebellum South's poor whites. Authors of the volume's other essays (Bolton, Culclasure, David Kleit, Victoria E. Bynum, and Joseph P. Reidy) generally portray Isham as the product of a society that demeaned all dependent labor and perhaps cared even less about the well being of poor white laborers than it did about slaves. Arguably the most probing of the essays is Bynum's examination of the place of women in Isham's rugged world. Possessing blond hair, blue eyes, a fair complexion, and a muscular body, Isham had little trouble attracting women, most of whom he treated poorly. Recognizing a disregard for women as a persistent theme of Isham's autobiography, Bynum reasons that it is difficult to imagine a life as senselessly violent as Isham's that did not also involve the physical abuse of women (a subject on which Isham's autobiography is silent) as well the repetitive pattern of adultery, neglect, and abandonment (which Isham's own account readily admits). Bynum concludes that Isham's life

reveals much about female vulnerability and male abuse of power in the patriarchal Old South.

As a common laborer, Isham exhibited as much "independence" in his own way as any yeoman freeholder, but Isham's sense of independence manifested itself as a negative freedom, a freedom from work, a freedom from moral sanction, a freedom from responsibility, rather than a guarantee of virtuous citizenship. Moreover, contrary to the prevailing antebellum southern (and American) pattern, Isham's self-definition of manhood and freedom had little to do with race or "whiteness." He regularly drank and gambled with both slaves and free blacks, he enjoyed sexual involvement with a young free black woman, he triggered public disorder when he escorted his free black consort to a local "grocery," and he once worked as a day laborer for a free black landowner in Tennessee.

In sum, Isham's autobiography and the essays that place it in context provide a window into the world of antebellum poor whites, laborers who lived lives of transiency and economic insecurity and sometimes fraternized across racial lines. The vision is one of free laborers marginalized economically by slavery and ideologically by a proslavery argument that maintained that slavery prevented the emergence of a dependent white working class in slaveholding areas. Isham's life, and the lives of his associates, belied the claim.

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University of South Carolina

HOWARD JONES. *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union and Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1999. Pp. xii, 236. \$29.95.

No matter what position Abraham Lincoln took on the slavery issue prior to January 1863, it failed to dissuade the European powers from considering mediation between the North and South and/or recognition of the Confederacy. In the early months when Lincoln declared that saving the Union and not interfering with slavery was the primary objective of the war, the powers regarded the struggle as a fight for southern self-determination. They seemed unaware of Lincoln's need to tread carefully on the slavery issue in order to retain support in the border states and in the North. While England and France had both championed antislavery causes in the past, their fear of a cotton famine and its effect on their economies caused them to overlook the fact that support of the South might lead to the perpetuation of human bondage there. When Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, the powers did not regard his action as a genuine abolition effort. Rather, it seemed an attempt to incite servile insurrection in the South and bring about the collapse of the Confederacy from within. English and French officials both charged Lincoln with resorting to racial warfare because Union armies were incapable of achieving victory on the battlefield. Only in the months following