

**'Men and Women of Their Own Kind':
Historians and Antebellum Reform**

Glenn M. Harden

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**'Men and Women of Their Own Kind':
Historians & Antebellum Reform**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

By

Glenn M. Harden
Bachelor of Arts
The George Washington University, 1992

Director: Dr. Jane T. Censer, Associate Professor
Department of History

Fall Semester 2000
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Fairfax, Virginia

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Dedication

*To those antebellum reformers and their historians
who, seeking truth, had the courage to try something new*

Acknowledgments

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Abstract

'MEN AND WOMEN OF THEIR OWN KIND': HISTORIANS AND ANTEBELLUM REFORM

Glenn M. Harden, M.A.
George Mason University, 2001
Thesis Director: Dr. Jane T. Censer

This thesis traces the historiography of antebellum reform from its origins in Gilbert Barnes's rebellion from the materialist reductionism of the Progressives to the end of the twentieth century. The focus is the ideas of the historians at the center of the historiography, not a summary of every work in the field. The works of Gilbert Barnes, Alice Felt Tyler, Whitney Cross, C. S. Griffin, Donald Mathews, Paul Johnson, Ronald Walters, George Thomas, Robert Abzug, Steven Mintz, and John Quist, among many others, are discussed. In particular, the thesis examines the social control interpretation and its transformation into "social organization" under more sympathetic historians in the 1970s. The author found the state of the historiography at century's end to be healthy with a promising future.

Introduction

The Historical Point of View, put briefly, means that when a learned man is presented with any statement in an ancient author, the one question he never asks is whether it is true. He asks who influenced the ancient writer, and how far the statement is consistent with what he said in other books, and what phase in the writer's development, or in the general history of thought, it illustrates, and how it affected later writers, and how often it has been misunderstood (specially by the learned man's own colleagues) and what the general course of criticism on it has been for the last ten years, and what is the "present state of the question." To regard the ancient writer as a possible source of knowledge--to anticipate that what he said could possibly modify your thoughts or your behavior--this would be rejected as unutterably simple-minded.

-- Screwtape¹

The work of the historiographer is a dangerous one, for the historiographer is both historian and historian's critic and is thus exposed to the charge of hypocrisy. And my own work, presented here, is even more open to this charge because one of its central themes is that *sympathy makes understanding possible*. Specifically, my thesis is that those historians of reform who approached their subjects with sympathy *understood them better* than those historians who lacked sympathy.

By sympathy, I mean a willingness to enter into another person's thoughts and feelings and to make them one's own, at least temporarily. I chose to use "sympathy" over "empathy"

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Rev. Ed. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1982), 128-129.

because the definition of the latter word emphasizes the “projection of one’s own personality into the personality of another in order to understand him better.”² While in reality the ability to take upon oneself the mind and heart of another may involve the projection of oneself into the other, I wished to stress the transfer of thoughts and feelings *from* the other to oneself. Moreover, sympathy is greatly aided by an affinity of ideas, emotions, or lifestyle, which the use of the word also suggests. Although the influence of affinity is significant, I do not mean to imply that understanding is impossible without it. On the contrary, I believe that, in essence, sympathy is an act of the will, and, therefore, people may ultimately understand each other.

Consequently, in my own writing I have endeavored to treat my subjects with sympathy. I hope the reader will recognize that any failure on my part to treat my own subjects with sympathy will not reflect negatively on my thesis, but merely on my abilities as a writer. All the historians examined herein have earned my lasting respect whether or not I agreed with them. Their superior intellect and erudition continually humbled me and often produced admiration.

The reader should know that my thesis stands in contrast to the wisdom of C. S. Griffin, who authored *The Ferment of Reform*, the only book-length treatment of the historiography of antebellum reform. Whereas Griffin recommended unemotional detachment, I do not believe that history, or any of the humanities, could or should be studied in a way that excludes the heart. Through history and literature we learn about the human condition--and our condition--by stepping into someone else’s shoes and walking in their steps. While this exercise requires us to use our minds, it cannot be completed by the intellect alone. In history, science without sympathy will create a form of knowledge without true understanding.

Historiography is a specialized form of intellectual history, and the purpose of this study is to examine how

² David B. Guralnik, ed., Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language, Second College Edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 458.

historians have explained antebellum reform as a whole. Consequently, this study is primarily concerned with those works that strive to answer the questions, “why did antebellum reform happen when it did?” and “what is the meaning of antebellum reform?” Historians have written many fine monographs and biographies about specific reforms and reformers that will not appear here because their focus was more narrowly construed. On the other hand, some community studies are included because their findings had much wider implications. I hasten to add, however, that time limitations also constrained my selection of works, and therefore, certain historiographical issues--the international context for reform, to name one example--do not receive the attention they deserve. Nonetheless, I believe that my outline will help readers place works not included herein within the historiographical context.

Except for a chapter on defining reform, I have organized my study chronologically. I have nonetheless defined certain eras by dominant themes within the historiography. This is necessarily an inexact science, since historians simply refuse to write in well-defined schools, and within all eras I found themes lingering from earlier ones as well as historians who simply marched to their own drummers.

I. Defining Reform

In his 1966 Master's thesis, Melvin L. Wilson accused antebellum historians of rendering the word "reform" virtually meaningless. He called into question the "honesty, capacity, and objectivity" of historians who, he believed, used the concept to "buttress value judgments." Specifically, Wilson accused historians of turning to Ralph Waldo Emerson for confirmation or a catchy phrase, but ultimately distorting his ideas. Wilson declared that "not a single full analysis of [Emerson's] thought existed in the literature."¹

In order to alleviate this deficiency, as well as provide support for his historical criticism, Wilson offered a short analysis of Emerson's ideas about reform. Wilson argued that Emerson "was careful to distinguish between the theory and the practice" of reform. Reform, in theory, was founded on the "infinite worthiness in man" and the removal of impediments to his elevation. Reform, in practice, claimed exclusive virtue, exaggerated evils, proposed panaceas, and encouraged self-righteousness. Furthermore, Emerson believed that every person was both a reformer and a conservative: people wanted to change some things and keep other things the same. Wilson concluded that "Emerson's generalizations about the nature of reform were broad enough to encompass virtually any kind of human activity, done individually or collectively." In so defining the term, Emerson was attempting "to put the word 'reform' in the public domain."²

According to Wilson, historians misused Emerson, often accepting his ideas about reform in principle (e.g., the removal of

¹ Melvin L. Wilson, "Reform as Puzzle: Historians View Antebellum Reform" (Master's thesis, University of Kansas, 1966), 5-7.

² *Ibid.*, 8-13.

impediments to freedom), while ignoring his criticisms of reformers. Other historians expressed Emersonian themes in their works, but without analysis of his thought. Consequently, Wilson believed that Emerson's views "muddled rather than clarified ante-bellum reform."³ For example, Wilson claimed that the intellectual historian Vernon Parrington "used Emerson's ideas about the dichotomy between reform and conservatism and thereby put Emerson in line with his own prejudices," although Wilson's footnotes failed to substantiate this claim.⁴ In another example, Wilson accused Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. in *The American as Reformer* of arranging "Emerson's criticisms of the reformers in such a way as to make it appear that Emerson was castigating only the more fanatical abolitionists of the Garrison and John Brown variety."⁵ In actuality, Schlesinger noted that Emerson approved of John Brown, however inconsistent this may have been with the former's stated principles.⁶

Altogether, Wilson's own evidence seems insufficient for his strong criticism. His pet criticism--that no one fully analyzed Emerson's thought--was merely a way of saying that he wished historians wrote different books. His more serious accusation--that historians' reliance on Emerson muddled the definition of reform--was not so well founded. In his own list of historians who shared common ideas with Emerson, Wilson showed that many historians recognized in antebellum reform both Emersonian themes--the removal of impediments to greater freedom and faith in the human capacity for improvement. Although most historians (at least until the 1950s) did reject Emerson's criticism of reformers, some historians nonetheless held a rather clear idea of reform. According to Wilson's evidence (but not his conclusions), historians by 1963 were well on their way to developing a consensus definition of reform along Emersonian lines.

³ Ibid., 18.

⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., *The American as Reformer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951), 41-42.

This is not to say that formation of this consensus was complete. Wilson went to some lengths to show that historians of his day were still struggling over a precise definition of reform. Some of the examples he cited, such as “Reform was a wind sweeping through the world” (Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of Union*) and “reform means merely the reshaping of society” (James Malin, *A Concern About Humanity*) do show the difficulties that some historians faced in giving meaning to the word.⁷ They saw distinctions between reform as improving society and reform as improving individuals. But the most common tendency—one which Wilson particularly despised—was defining reform in such a way that included efforts that the historian favored, but excluded those that the historian despised. Yet those scholars who tried to define reform without reference to their personal predilections—such as Malin cited above—developed definitions so broad as to make them virtually meaningless.⁸

Wilson concluded that “the failure to provide adequate definitions” was a “very crucial [weakness] in the historiography.”⁹ According to him, historians did not really know what they were talking about. In some ways, Wilson’s case against historians was strong. Many historians did define reform abstractly or in a manner colored by their own bias. Nonetheless his conclusion overreached his case.

Certainly failure to agree on a precise definition makes the historiographer’s task more difficult, but this does not necessarily imply that historians were wasting their efforts. The meaning of the word “reform” is inherently abstract and shaped by individual beliefs, but that does not mean the word is meaningless. Biologists and psychologists may debate what makes humans unique without being accused of knowing nothing

⁷ Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of Union*, vol. 1, *Fruits of Manifest Destiny 1847-1852* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947), 113. James C. Malin, *A Concern About Humanity: Notes on Reform, 1872-1912 at the National and Kansas Levels of Thought* (Lawrence, KS: By the author, 1541 University Dr., 1964), 1. Nevins actually left the term undefined; his “definition” was a metaphor.

⁸ Wilson, 21-26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

about what it means to be “human.” Likewise, historians and sociologists may wrestle with labels like “reform,” “progressive,” “liberal,” or “reactionary,” but still retain some understanding of their meanings. Wilson’s criticisms and conclusions show his desire for a clearly-stated, discriminating, and universal definition of reform. Furthermore, he apparently believed that this elusive definition was both a realistic possibility and a necessary foundation for historical knowledge. Finally, Wilson suggested that Emersonian thought would be the best source (or guide) for this objective definition.

C. S. Griffin, Wilson’s thesis director, answered Wilson’s call for more analysis of the meaning of reform in his 1967 book, *The Ferment of Reform, 1830-1860*. This work, part of a series offering students a survey of recent scholarship, is both dedicated and openly indebted to Melvin Wilson. Griffin made use of much of Wilson’s research, concurring with his student that historians had “not agreed about the meaning of reform or the insights it offered.”¹⁰

Unlike Wilson, however, Griffin acknowledged that “most historians of reform crusades have agreed with [Emerson’s] description of reform,” citing specifically the important works of Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. (*The American as Reformer*) and Alice Felt Tyler (*Freedom’s Ferment*).¹¹ Nonetheless, Griffin did not attempt to define reform himself; rather, his work reflected greater interest in the question of bias. What irked Griffin (as it had Wilson) was the way in which some historians defined reform so as to include only movements of which they approved.

Griffin used anti-Catholicism to demonstrate this problem of definition. Many historians disapproved of the nativist movement, and some rejected it as a reform altogether. Nativism did not fit well with the dominant Emersonian definition of reform which emphasized the removal of impediments to the betterment of humanity. According to Griffin, if nativism was a

¹⁰ Clifford S. Griffin, *The Ferment of Reform, 1830-1860*, The Crowell American History Series (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967), 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

reform movement, "it might be necessary to define reform in a different way from that accepted by the majority of historians."¹²

For Griffin, the lack of an agreed-upon definition of reform was not a significant barrier to historical knowledge; rather, the lack of a definition demonstrated historians' internal biases of historians, which, in his opinion, obscured knowledge. Consequently, Griffin echoed Wilson's call for a reevaluation of Emersonian thought and its application to the definition of reform. Agreeing with Emerson that "every man is also a conservative," he believed that "reform activities are often the expression of conservatism," and therefore "reform itself needs considerable redefinition."¹³ And if reform was an expression of conservatism as he suggested, perhaps it did not deserve so much moral approbation from modern historians.

Since 1967, few historians have bothered to define reform, probably because they assumed that their audience already knew what they meant by the term. Curiously, Emersonian thought has received little attention from antebellum reform historians despite Griffin's and Wilson's calls for more analysis. Ronald Walters (*American Reformers*) and Steven Mintz (*Moralists & Modernizers*), the only two historians to publish broad overviews of antebellum reform since Griffin's *Ferment of Reform*, only mentioned Emerson in passing and did not discuss his thoughts on reform. The consensus of a definition of reform along Emersonian lines that had been building prior to Wilson's and Griffin's works has been set aside in favor of a less biased, yet meaningful definition set forth most importantly by Ronald Walters in 1978. Walters's definition continued and improved on definitions offered by forebears like James Malin, which I shall call the "directed social change" tradition.

In his preface to his *American Reformers, 1815-1830*, an overview of antebellum reform, Ronald G. Walters spent several pages discussing the historiographical debates surrounding the qualities and motivations of the reformers and comparing "reformers" with "radicals." Toward the end of this discussion,

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 31.

Walters defined a “reform movement” as “any collective, organized effort to improve society or individuals by achieving some well-articulated goal.” The emphasis here was not the object of reform, but the method. His definition excluded the individuals acting in isolation as well as organized groups acting without articulated goals for changing society (e.g., the press or most religious denominations). Consequently his definition was broad enough to include every movement historians usually lump under the heading “antebellum reform” while not so broad as to include virtually any human activity.

In so defining reform, Walters wanted to remove history from “the mercy of present-day politics” and rely on the “reformer’s word that what he or she is doing is really a reform.” Walters was willing to concede that some despised movements would nonetheless meet his definition (he cited the Ku Klux Klan of the 1860s and 1870s as an example) and ought to be considered reforms for purposes of analysis, but not moral support. Yet he himself rejected antimasonry and nativism as reform movements because both were “fuzzy about what sort of social order they wanted”--a debatable position. Many other reform movements--temperance for example--were no less fuzzy in articulating their vision for the new social order, while some evangelical denominations had both a vision for society and well-articulated goals. So while Walter’s definition may hold promise, even he was not fully successful in complying with it.¹⁴

In his review of *American Reformers*, C. S. Griffin noted Walters’s failure to heed his own definition, which Griffin believed was too broad. Griffin concluded his review by stating,

Until historians have both an adequate definition of reform and the will to follow it wherever it leads, they cannot adequately understand reform phenomena. It is good for general readers to have summaries of the state of

¹⁴ Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers 1815-1860*, American Century Series (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), xiv, 12.

the art. But thirty years after Alice Felt Tyler's *Freedom's Ferment*, it is time for the art to move on.¹⁵

Griffin, who had once admitted that he had "Emersonian proclivities,"¹⁶ was clearly unhappy with the directed social change approach to defining reform. Ironically, it was this very approach that was advancing "the state of the art," however imperfectly Walters may have followed it.

Another historian, Robert H. Walker, attempted to unite the Emersonian and social change approaches to reform with an extensive and explicit definition in his 1985 work, *Reform in America: The Continuing Frontier*. Walker's objective was nothing less than a comprehensive analysis of reform throughout American history. In contrast to Ronald Walters who found discontinuity between eras of reform, Walker desired to find "larger meanings of reform buried under the assumption that it is a series of isolated struggles for fixed objectives." As such, he hoped to set forth "a structure, a vocabulary, and an open-ended method for generalizing about reform."¹⁷

Walker divided American reform into three broad channels, or "modes": "politico-economic reform, reform for special groups, and the presentation of model societies." While admitting that these modes did not represent all of reform, Walker believed that they did represent the "general direction of social change." Walker continued by defining reform as "a process of adjusting social attitudes and institutions to meet an evolving set of basic conditions." As such, "it is not a separable element in the chain of cause and effect." In the equally difficult question of defining reformers, Walker sidestepped motivation entirely, and defined the reformer as "a person, an association, or an agency that seeks to direct social change." For Walker, as for Walters, how reformers were moved to assume their role was not nearly as

¹⁵ Clifford S. Griffin, review of *American Reformers* by Ronald G. Walters, in *The American Historical Review* 84 (June 1979): 852.

¹⁶ Griffin, *Ferment of Reform*, 92.

¹⁷ Robert H. Walker, *Reform in America: The Continuing Frontier* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985), vii, 8.

important as how reformers attempted to move their fellow citizens.¹⁸

Walker described the “natural sequence” of reform as passing through five stages: “random negative (unorganized protest), structured negative (organized protest), random positive (various remedies), structured positive (organized movement with constructive aim), [and] watchdog (surveillance of institutionalized reform).” The different modes showed some “distinctive variations” to this pattern. While political-economic reform often followed this pattern, reform on behalf of particular groups (i.e. social justice) traveled the cycle twice and the presentation of model societies began at the fourth or fifth stage. Nonetheless, he believed that setting forth the natural sequence might aid in understanding the distinctiveness of movements that did not follow the standard pattern.¹⁹

In his conclusion, Walker claimed that “the history of American society has been skewed because of a general failure to recognize social change in any but its final stages.” His proposed stages offered a potential corrective in that their “one great value” was “to broaden the social history of reform.” Consequently, one might appreciate that “all eras are reform eras” and refrain from “flat characterizations of American eras as being totally engaged or completely apathetic.”²⁰ His definition and classification of reform thus supported his argument that American reform possessed a unifying pattern or “interrelated continuum.”²¹

This is quite an effort to dispute Ronald Walters’s assertion that “lack of continuity marks one of the chief characteristics of American reform.”²² Perhaps unaware of Walters’s comment, one reviewer, Roy Lubove, a Progressive era and urban historian, blasted Walker for creating a straw man,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

²¹ *Ibid.*, viii

²² Walters, x. Walters’s points were paraphrased without attribution in Walker, *Reform in America*, viii.

adding, "I doubt that any contemporary historian would argue that social reform lacks continuities and similarities." He concluded, "Walker's attempts to reduce the level of generalization lead, not to insight into the reform process, but to an opaque prose that gives academic writing a bad name."²³

Allowing for overstatement on Lubove's part, Walker's effort remains less than satisfactory. While, on one hand, he emphasized the process of social adjustment to change as the essence of reform, his three modes followed Emerson's theme of removal of impediments. Yet not all reforms--Sabbatarianism for example--could be so easily classified. Furthermore, both politico-economic reform and social justice petitioned the state for action, while some antebellum reform efforts were directed at changing individuals without state help (e.g., temperance in its early stages or the Sunday School movement) and yet could not fit in the third mode (model societies). His sequence of reform is more insightful, but the early stages are not particularly useful to historians, except perhaps to indicate a connection between reform eras. Would a study of "unorganized protest" really be classified as a study of reform? Most historians of reform study reform *movements*, and thus pick up with Walker's second or higher stage. Ultimately Walker's study suffered from his efforts to combine the directed social change theme with the Emersonian theme.

No antebellum historian appears to have wrestled with any of Walker's thought. His work does not appear in Robert Abzug's footnotes to *Cosmos Crumbling* or George Thomas's bibliography in *Revivalism and Cultural Change*, which, in some respects, resembles Walker's efforts. In his recent summation of antebellum reform, *Moralists & Modernizers*, Steven Mintz not only omitted Walker from his bibliographic essay, but did not include any discussion of the definition of reform. Historians have simply stopped trying to define reform: the debate has been stopped. Melvin Wilson would be most displeased.

²³ Roy Lubove, review of *Reform in America: The Continuing Frontier* by Robert H. Walker, in *The Journal of American History* 73 (December 1986): 722. Other reviews were favorable.

Lack of an agreed-upon definition has not kept historians from searching for the sources of antebellum reform, however. As we shall see, three sources, often overlapping, have most intrigued historians: the socio-economic environment, evangelical religion, and the reformer's psyche. First, however, historians rejected other potential sources, such as transcendentalism.

II. Foundations of Antebellum Reform Historiography, 1875-1951

The historiography of antebellum reform began with Gilbert Barnes's repudiation of the material reductionism of the Progressives. In many ways a Progressive himself, Barnes discovered the importance of revival religion for reform in the person of Theodore Dwight Weld, and he wrote about his discovery with an influential passion. Moreover, the new social history led Barnes and other historians to more deeply explore antebellum life beyond politics. They found there the fascinating subject of antebellum reform.

The early years of the historiography laid the foundation for what would follow. In searching for sources of reform, the early historians of antebellum reform rejected Transcendentalism in favor of evangelical Protestantism. Moreover, they debated whether ideas or socio-economic forces were more influential causes--a debate that continues at the century's end. They wrote both intellectual and social histories and introduced into their works the insights of the social sciences--specifically psychology and sociology. The labors and controversies that followed would not have been possible but for these pioneers.

Transcendentalism Rejected

The philosophy of transcendentalism, an offshoot of liberal Unitarianism in New England, produced or influenced a number of reformers and reform movements. Consequently, historians have given transcendentalism some attention in the historiography of antebellum reform. As we have seen, the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, a leading member of the transcendental club, influenced historians earlier in the century in defining reform, and his influence still persists in works as recent as Robert Walker's *Reform in America*.

In his 1966 essay, Melvin Wilson claimed that "transcendentalism assumed an importance in twentieth century

historiography that it never had in ante-bellum history."¹ Believing that some historians had exaggerated the influence of transcendentalism as a source of antebellum reform, Wilson created a "straw man" that he proceeded to tear down. He was convinced that "it never occurred to Emerson to claim transcendentalism as a major source of ante-bellum reform," but that "some scholars saw transcendentalism as the major spiritual current flowing through all ante-bellum reform."² Unfortunately, Wilson's evidence for his assertion was highly selective and misleading. Two historians whom Wilson cited as evidence did make transcendentalism central to their examination of reform, but a third did not, and, as Wilson himself admitted, most historians had minimized or ignored transcendentalism's influence for reform.

Two historians who, according to Wilson, exaggerated the influence of transcendentalism as a source for reform were Stanley Elkins and Henry Steele Commager. In his *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, published in 1959, Stanley Elkins called the transcendentalists "key figures" and declared that "the abolitionists could not have duplicated the intellectual pattern of the Transcendentalists more precisely if they had tried."³ However, even he refused to "exhibit the Transcendentalists as sole spiritual predecessors to the abolitionists."⁴ Henry Steele Commager argued persuasively in his biography of Theodore Parker, published in 1936, that a circle of Boston reformers held transcendentalism in common.⁵ While this claim was far from universal, Commager declared later in his introduction to *The Era of Reform 1830-1860* that antebellum reform

¹ Wilson, "Reform as Puzzle," 34.

² *Ibid.*, 35.

³ Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, with an introduction by Nathan Glazer, Universal Library Edition (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1963), 165.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁵ Henry Steele Commager, *Theodore Parker*, 2d ed. (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1947), 153.