


BOOK REVIEWS

John Frederick Bell. *Degrees of Equality: Abolitionist Colleges and the Politics of Race*

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“We must get more students, and especially more white students” (p. 182). With those words written in 1892, Berea College president William Goodell Frost proposed a supposedly minor change to his institution. Berea had been unique for decades, a distinctly interracial college with a solid majority of Black students, but Frost believed that an influx of White students would increase the school’s prestige. He was right. Frost’s plan to recruit “mountain whites” of the Appalachians attracted wealthy donors and brought a tenfold increase in Berea’s endowment over the next two decades. But within that same span, Berea’s Black students became first disaffected and then disqualified, turned away both by the laws of Jim Crow Kentucky and by a campus no longer amenable to racial integration. Just as many other hopeful results of emancipation failed, so too did this educational experiment.

These are just a few of the possibilities and perils outlined by John Frederick Bell in this history of abolitionist colleges in the nineteenth-century United States. *Degrees of Equality* focuses on three institutions: Oberlin College, New York Central College, and Berea. Among predominantly White colleges of that era, they were some of the most prolific in their education of Black men and women. Because of their radical egalitarianism, they were perhaps the best hope for racial reconciliation through higher education. Yet, as Bell demonstrates, these three colleges offered only “mixed success” and “degrees of equality” (pp. x, 8). Despite founding principles and proclaimed objectives to the contrary, abolitionist colleges were unable to remedy “the gap between equal admission and equal acceptance” (p. 29).

As it jumps between institutions and marches from the 1830s to the 1890s, *Degrees of Equality* finds a common thread. While each college took its own path, all three exhibited the same tensions between equality in theory and in practice. The fundamental question, as Bell puts it, was whether “racial equality” was “a goal to be realized or a fact to be honored” (p. 44). In our own time and in light of racism’s persistence, we might read this and lean toward equality as an ongoing process rather than a *fait accompli*. But the abolitionist colleges asked something different: Were Black collegians to be treated as equals because they had proved themselves equals (through attainment of learning, character, and the like), or because they were already equals, heirs of the same common humanity endowed by God?

Early on, abolitionist colleges hosted numerous advocates of common humanity, many of them evangelical Christians who saw racial and gender coeducation as ways of effecting conversions. At Oberlin, which committed to racial integration in 1835, the combination of abolitionism and evangelicalism led to well-attended anti-slavery events, participation in the Underground Railroad, and interracial worship and dining. At New York Central, which folded shortly before the Civil War, the anti-slavery convictions of the American Baptist Free Mission Society led to the appointment of the first Black professor in the United States, Charles Reason. These colleges were also revolutionary in their coeducation of men and women. Bell devotes his third chapter to Black female students at Oberlin, and throughout the book he demonstrates how ideas about gender and sexuality influenced abolitionist colleges. In sum, the colleges offered brief glimpses of utopia: Black and White, women and men, learning together on campuses that were extraordinary for their time.

Even at their beginnings, however, abolitionist colleges contained seeds of the belief that racial equality had to be earned. One of Oberlin's White founders defended racial integration by saying that the college "should receive *only* those to whom no objection could be made except by prejudice against a dark skin" (p. 27). White students in these Christian educational communities were also subject to tests of character and piety, but educators put a greater burden of proof on Black students. White peers added their own racial assumptions, as in the case of one Oberlin student who argued that slavery had "degraded and imbruted" those under it (p. 43). The result for Black students was a painful responsibility that, Bell shows, they bore courageously. As Oberlin alum Fanny Jackson Coppin later reflected, "I never rose to recite in my classes at Oberlin but I felt that I had the honor of the whole African race upon my shoulders" (p. 89).

Campus climates worsened after the Civil War. Controversy around interracial romance struck Berea in 1871-72, as it had similarly roiled Oberlin and New York Central in previous decades, and when Berea's trustees were asked for their stance, they responded ambiguously. Oberlin's atmosphere turned cold as the newly founded *Oberlin Review* justified racial essentialism and violence against African Americans. Black students and alumni felt betrayed, White students felt free to discriminate, and fragile bonds were replaced by quiet enmity. At Berea, Bell writes, "accord was increasingly achieved through distance rather than dialogue" (p. 137). At Oberlin, White students self-segregated because of "unspoken ideas of inherent difference," and educators tacitly consented on the basis of freedom of association (p. 141). For a time, the elderly abolitionists of Oberlin and Berea held out hope that the interracial education they had once known would continue. But "the rising generation had only secondhand knowledge of the [abolitionist] movement," Bell writes, "and their attentions were elsewhere" (p. 160).

Degrees of Equality is incisive and flavored with stories that juxtapose the everydayness of student life with the revolutionary nature of the abolitionist colleges. In the balance between educators and students, Bell eschews the historiography's frequent focus on the former and leans toward the latter. Memoirs and letters convey the educational experiences of students both White and Black, while trustee and administrator records show how leaders navigated what Bell in one place terms "the contingencies of interracial fellowship" (pp. 68-69). We see how campus and

local communities responded—typically poorly—to the specter of interracial marriage; we see how Black and White students navigated the sharing (or racial segregation) of dining hall tables; we see how White college presidents hired or, more often, did *not* hire Black faculty amid conflicting demands from constituents. And throughout, Bell highlights the roles of Black students and alumni as “agents of change” who were the strongest advocates for their own equal treatment (p. 8).

Bell’s highly focused narrative does come with some drawbacks. While readers get a good sense of how religious and gender ideology permeated the abolitionist colleges, Bell could have given even more context on race and racism. In the absence of regular references to other nineteenth-century colleges, Bell’s critiques can cause readers to forget just how advanced the abolitionist colleges were in comparison. Bell also gives only limited insight into the sources of the colleges’ reinvigorated bigotry. He points toward the rise of two intellectual movements, liberalism and cultural evolutionism, which recast racial equality as the result of an individual’s own merit or a race’s past effort rather than as an intrinsic, preexisting element of human nature. Other causes, however, may have been equally influential. The egalitarian evangelicalism of the abolitionist colleges’ early years is notably absent from Bell’s later chapters, probably because of the institutions’ realignments with a more hierarchy-minded mainstream Christianity. Theology could inspire equality; it could also reinforce difference. Relatedly, it seems likely that this renewed racism did not have academic origins but rather was born, or else never died, in more humble social spaces such as homes and churches. Intellectualism may have only dressed up old prejudices learned outside the ivory tower, prejudices that no civil war could kill.

All the same, *Degrees of Equality* is an excellent book and would make a good addition to the graduate or undergraduate history classroom. Graduate students can learn much from Bell’s precise recounting of human action and motivation. Undergraduates can learn this as well, but also a more basic and “relevant” lesson: that the priorities of their institutions, and even the banalities of the campus dining hall or dating scene, are not without meaning.

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Victoria Cain. *Schools and Screens: A Watchful History*

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Schools and screens are, as Victoria Cain states early in her new volume, our two “most powerful educational forces.” (p. 3). A history of the way that schools made