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William Lloyd Garrison, Transatlantic Abolitionism and Colonisation in the Mid Nineteenth Century: The Revival of the Peculiar Solution?

David Brown

One of the most persistent white responses to the ‘problem’ of slavery and race relations in the nineteenth-century United States was to suggest the removal and relocation of African Americans. The transatlantic abolitionist movement, however, decisively rejected colonisation in the early 1830s, and conventional wisdom suggests that they maintained their firm opposition from that point onwards. It is curious, then, that abolitionists in Britain and the United States enthusiastically received a text in 1857 – The Impending Crisis of the South – calling for colonisation as well as abolition. This article explains the reasons why they did so. It demonstrates that the Garrisonians recognised the book’s potential for influencing the critical presidential election of 1860 and consequently sought to aid efforts to ensure wide circulation, belying their reputation for avoiding electoral politics.

Conventional wisdom suggests that colonisation was received with enthusiasm by many, if not most, Anglo-American anti-slavery whites in the first third of the nineteenth century, but that the popularity of colonisation and support for the American Colonization Society (ACS) within abolitionist ranks declined dramatically from the early 1830s. The shift entailed a fundamental rejection of colonisation for the far more radical philosophy of immediate abolition without compensation, and of biraclism. Closely associated with American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, this anti-slavery philosophy evolved into an uncompromising demand for slavery’s unconditional, immediate cessation and the quest for African American civil rights. Black abolitionists never supported colonisation and were a persistent thorn in the side of the ACS. Less radical anti-slavery groups seeking a gradual end to slavery, or to isolate slavery in places where it already existed, continued to regard colonisation as
viable, but they were increasingly despised by mainstream abolitionists. A clear distinction emerged in the early 1830s, then, between abolitionist and anti-slavery factions on this issue. As one recent study puts it: ‘From that point forward, white and black abolitionists echoed one another’s cry that colonization was a racist scheme that both condoned and encouraged white racial prejudices’.1

It is this standard historical narrative of the relationship between colonisation and abolitionism that forms the departure point for this article. By the late 1850s, there is reason to question whether transatlantic abolitionists were quite so strident in their opposition. They remained staunchly opposed to the ACS but enthusiastically celebrated publication of North Carolinian Hinton Rowan Helper’s critique of slavery, The Impending Crisis of the South (1857), which proposed the removal of emancipated blacks from the United States.2 Rivalled only by Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) in terms of its notoriety and political impact as an anti-slavery text, Helper’s book served to unify abolitionists with other groups with whom relations were usually antagonistic – Free Soilers, anti-slavery factions, former Whigs and, most notably, the Republican Party. Their combined efforts to circulate the text as widely as possible resulted in a shortened compendium version distributed as Republican campaign literature in the critical election of 1860. It sold over 140,000 copies, contributing to Abraham Lincoln’s victory and thus to the outbreak of the American Civil War.3

How and why the transatlantic abolitionist movement endorsed, and even celebrated, a book advocating colonisation, when the strategy was supposedly anathema, is a question that has been entirely ignored. This article is the first to consider the reception of The Impending Crisis among abolitionists in Great Britain, as well as those in the United States. It demonstrates that there were many commonalities between their responses, but that different historical contexts also shaped their reactions. Crucially, the reaction of the Garrisonians demonstrates that they were far more in tune with national politics than is usually accepted and strategically sought to exploit the political system to further their goals. An important recent study states that Garrison ‘shunned politics’ and that ‘voting seemed to him not only useless but a degrading participation in an immoral system’, but involvement with The Impending Crisis suggests otherwise.4

A transatlantic stir

Samuel May, Jr. wrote to his long-time friend and correspondent Richard Davis Webb in August 1857, just over three weeks after the first major review of The Impending Crisis appeared in the New York Daily Tribune. Webb, ‘[p]ostman, printer, and librarian for the transatlantic Garrisonian movement’, according to Douglas C. Riach, was a lynchpin of British and Irish abolitionism. May, a member of Garrison’s inner circle, who should not be confused with his cousin and fellow abolitionist Samuel J. May from Syracuse, was as important as Webb in maintaining transatlantic links; one of three reformers, Clare Taylor suggests, ‘who were probably more responsible for maintaining the Anglo-American connection than any of the other American abolitionists.’5 May had never been more effusive in his praise of a new publication. ‘I have lately
forwarded to you a copy of a new and very remarkable book’, May wrote. ‘It is one of those books, which … will reward the faith and patience of the abolitionists’. *The Impending Crisis*

throughout adopts and bravely carries a tone and manner to which hitherto the South has shown itself almost a stranger. The book takes up slavery as a social, economical, financial question. It argues and demonstrates … that slavery is a complete and unmitigated curse to the whole Southern society; that it is a millstone about its neck, perpetually dragging it lower and lower.

Helper states ‘that the Immediate Abolition of Slavery is the True Policy of the South’ and ‘shows how [abolition] can be effected’. It was not just the economic critique that appealed to May, however: Helper ‘does not wholly ignore the religious and moral aspects of the question; and deals with them in a frank and fearless manner’. In sum, May had not encountered any writer, let alone a southerner, who attacked slavery so rigorously without apology or hesitation; Helper ‘seems to have no taint of that … moral disease, which disqualifies the American mind so extensively for seeing that wrong is wrong, and ought to be … put away at once’. May was delighted that ‘the seeds’ of anti-slavery were ‘about to yield fruit’ on the hitherto ‘barren soil’ of the South.6

Webb shared his friend’s enthusiasm for *The Impending Crisis*. A few weeks later, he wrote to Anne Weston, another integral member of the Boston Garrisonian clique, including extracts from a review of *The Impending Crisis* that had just been published in the *Anti-Slavery Advocate*. Edited by Webb, the *Anti-Slavery Advocate* was one of the two most important anti-slavery periodicals published in the United Kingdom. Webb assumed that Anne had already heard about the book from her sister Maria, who was well known within British abolitionist circles for promoting the annual Boston Bazaar. Webb hailed the book’s publication as ‘a great event [that] … cannot fail to terrify the slaveholders and cause a stir among the poor whites’, although he qualified his optimism in writing: ‘I make a fool of myself to expect any great change from a book’.7

May’s reaction was echoed by other Garrisonians. J.M. McKim, for example, shared with Maria Chapman his optimism in Helper’s prediction that ‘the centennial anniversary of American independence will find every slave in the land disenthralled’. *The Impending Crisis* was held in high regard and its progress was followed carefully. In October 1857, May wrote again to Webb, including a review of the book that had caught his eye as the first from ‘a slaveholding State’. He was pleased that the review confirmed Helper as a bona fide North Carolinian – evidently, May, like many others, could not quite believe that such a strident critique of slavery could emerge from the South. He further noted that the pro-slavery response was to attack Helper personally. The failure ‘to address themselves to the book’ was because of its ‘cogent reasoning and unanswerable figures’. In short, the reservations one might expect the Boston abolitionists to hold about a book proposing colonisation did not stop Helper from becoming part of the mainstream in the late 1850s. Maria Chapman’s invitation to attend the annual National Anti-Slavery Society meeting in January 1860 seemingly confirmed Helper’s full acceptance.8
On the other side of the Atlantic, the enthusiastic response to *The Impending Crisis* is found mostly in printed sources (reviews in anti-slavery periodicals and newspapers), not manuscript collections – Webb’s letters are the exception. There is good reason for this. *The Impending Crisis* was not easy to get hold of in Great Britain and Ireland. As the British *Anti-Slavery Reporter* recognised, the initial print run was ‘sold within a very few months [in the United States]: a fact that speaks volumes for the avidity with which anti-Slavery literature of this class is sought after’. Even when a cheaper compendium edition was finally produced in 1859, it quickly became a best-seller in the winter of 1860–1861, and again sold out very quickly. Moreover, it was published by a book agent, A.B. Burdick, not a major publisher with international connections.9

There is enough evidence to state with certainty, however, that key players among the British Garrisonians who read Helper’s book were equally taken with it. Webb’s ally, Unitarian James Haughton, noted that the book was ‘not much known nor very accessible in this country’, but ‘very remarkable’. As late as April 1860, at the height of the book’s circulation in the United States, the secretary of the Edinburgh Ladies’ Emancipation Society, Eliza Wigham, requested that Samuel May send ‘a copy or two’, having given hers to George Thompson. ‘[T]o our surprise’, Wigham wrote, ‘he had never seen the book at all’. Thompson was the leading figure of British abolitionism and of many other humanitarian initiatives. As Caleb McDaniel notes, he was ‘Garrison’s most venerable ally in the British antislavery movement’. It is surprising that he had not encountered *The Impending Crisis* before then, although he had been in India when it was published. Thompson was impressed by what he read. ‘He says he can make many telling lectures from it … very beautiful & full of information’, wrote Wigham, who was ‘very hopeful that good may result from the information G. T. has been able to give’. Thompson had famously spoken out against colonisation in 1834 while touring the United States because ‘[i]t gratified prejudice … while it professed to promote the freedom and happiness of the free coloured population’. Wigham’s letter offers no hint whether colonisation measures in *The Impending Crisis* were found objectionable by Thompson. Indeed, so far as the extant evidence can tell us, no British abolitionist left us their opinion on Helper and colonisation.10

The appeal of *The Impending Crisis*

There were hundreds of abolitionist texts published in the 1850s, so why was Helper’s book so appealing to transatlantic abolitionists? *The Impending Crisis* focused on slavery’s harmful impact on non-slaveholding southerners and the South. Nonetheless, it was not solely concerned with whites. ‘Every victim of the vile institution, whether white or black, must be reinvested with the sacred rights and privileges of which he has been deprived by an inhuman oligarchy’, stressed Helper. His work covered a wide agenda, discussing many different aspects of the abolitionist debate. Sensitivity to the concerns of disparate constituencies is probably the single most significant factor in accounting for the book’s wide appeal. Crucially, *The Impending Crisis*
underscored the immorality of slavery and its contravention of Christianity, highlighting the injustice African Americans endured. If the enslaved ‘were to demand an equal share of all the property, real and personal, which has been accumulated or produced through their efforts, Heaven, we believe, would recognize them as honest claimants’. A strong moral indignity at the mistreatment of slaves, the separation of families and sexual abuse was tied to a republican critique of slave exploitation. Helper’s arguments, then, reflected the writings of numerous transatlantic abolitionists, many of whom were quoted in the text as supporting evidence. This point cannot be stressed enough. Had *The Impending Crisis* solely focused on southern whites, it would not have received widespread acclaim. Indeed, George Weston’s tract, *The Poor Whites of the South*, published just one year earlier, essentially preceded Helper’s central arguments but was largely ignored by contemporaries. Perhaps the most important factor in the popularity of *The Impending Crisis*, then, was its adept synthesis of many different strands of anti-slavery thinking – radical, moderate and conservative.11

That said, it was undoubtedly Helper’s free labour critique that readers found most persuasive and impressive. The economics of slavery and abolition was far more prominent by the 1850s than it had been in the earlier phase of the movement. While Garrisonians had not forgotten their insistence that slavery was a sin and a crime against God, it seems they were increasingly swayed by economic arguments. This was especially true in Great Britain, where the infighting that characterised the Garrisonians in the United States was not nearly as divisive. British abolitionists, for the most part, had little trouble in advocating a variety of means to end slavery and, indeed, in supporting a diverse range of humanitarian causes.12

Moreover, one of the most important causes for British abolitionists in the 1850s was the free produce movement, an attempt to revive the practice of boycotting slave-produced goods that had been significant in the effort to force emancipation in the West Indies. Henry, Anna and Ellen Richardson from Newcastle and the African American Henry Highland Garnet were the key figures. The revival of free produce stimulated, in turn, attempts to find alternative supplies to American cotton in British mills. The Cotton Supply Association formed in April 1857, just as Helper’s proofs were heading to the printers. As will be discussed below, *The Impending Crisis* appeared at a highly opportune moment with regard to the politics of slavery in the United States, but in Great Britain it coincided perfectly with heightened interest in free trade. It is not surprising, then, to find that British responses considered Helper’s economic arguments about the superiority of free labour compelling and the abundant statistics compiled from the 1850 US census a valuable source of evidence. The members of the Birmingham Ladies’ Negroes’ (sic) Friends Society, for instance, suggested that Helper and Frederick Law Olmsted – a writer often paired with Helper in British journals for his similar economic critique – ‘demonstrate, by the … most incontrovertible evidence, that Slavery and true commercial and social prosperity cannot exist together’. The *Anti-Slavery Reporter* wrote how *The Impending Crisis* ‘abounds in statistical information of the most valuable kind, exhausting the economic phases of the entire question’. As was typical of most abolitionist reviews, though, moral strands were also emphasised: Helper’s primary aim was to examine
slavery ‘as an economic system’, but his discussion of slavery’s ‘moral considerations, condemns it in language as strong as any that has ever been used by the most advanced party of Abolitionists in the North’.13

It was the Irish abolitionist James Haughton who gave the most effusive and extensive praise for Helper’s economic critique in his 1859 address to the Dublin Statistical Society (based heavily on extracts from The Impending Crisis). ‘The members of our society have doubtless always had a full conviction of the superior economic value of free over slave labour’, he said,

but as the point has been long stoutly contested by the advocates of slavery, and . . .
the public mind is much divided on the matter. Mr. Helper’s careful investigations
should, however, set the question at rest. Scientific truth, in this case, has been
happily established by the results he has brought forward.

The Impending Crisis ‘proved, by examples drawn from various sources of human
industry, the theory . . . that slave labour cannot compete with free labour; and the
opponents of slavery everywhere will rejoice to know that it is found’. Helper demonstra-
trates ‘that the political economist is a benefactor of his race’. Being distant from the
fierce political debates taking place across the Atlantic (and, in some cases, ignorant of
American politics in general, especially the federal system), it was the economic argu-
ments of The Impending Crisis that struck British abolitionists as the most apposite
and useful to their cause. James Haughton and George Thompson certainly used
them to their advantage.14

While economic arguments were far from unimportant in the United States, The
Impending Crisis was merely one of many books pushing a free labour critique of
slavery. Helper’s use of statistics added an air of authority to his account not
found elsewhere, perhaps, but his appeal to American abolitionists stemmed from
a gut reaction far more visceral than Haughton’s pondering about economic
science. By 1857, the war of words between pro- and anti-slavery forces had
reached an unprecedented intensity. The caning of Charles Sumner in 1856 was
the most visible measure of the mutual enmity. Into this highly charged atmosphere
came The Impending Crisis, described aptly by one historian as ‘probably the most
caustic, scathing, and vituperative criticism of slavery and slaveholders ever
written’.15 No matter what they made of Helper’s book, it is doubtful whether any
abolitionist could have failed to smile at his roasting of southern planters in print.
Samuel May certainly enjoyed it:

The most striking and encouraging feature of the book is the downright plainness of
its talk. This is exceedingly refreshing to those who have so long been nauseated by
the feeble twaddle which emanates from the great majority of Northern writers on
slavery, both political and ecclesiastical.

Helper, he continued:

has made up his mind that Slavery is a most execrable and ruinous thing, and he
expresses this opinion without . . . asking anybody’s pardon for saying so. And he
says it with all the directness and strength that the English language is capable of.’16
Raw directness was something that the New York Daily Tribune picked up on as well. Helper was

one who utters no stammering, hesitating nor uncertain sound, who possesses a
perfect mastery of his mother tongue, who speaks as well from a long study and
full knowledge of his subject as from profound convictions, and in whose vocabu-
lar the words fear and doubt seem to have no place.

The Tribune could hardly have done more to popularise the book among abolitionists
than to suggest Helper ‘speaks with scarcely less plainness and severity than
Mr. Garrison himself’. Quite simply, American abolitionists delighted in Helper’s
attack on the planter class.

Delight was also tinged with a huge sense of relief. For decades, abolitionists had
tried to reach the non-slaveholding southern majority. Garrison had hoped that
moral suasion might win over the South. Growing recognition that this policy was
not working contributed to splits in the movement in the 1840s over how to
proceed. Here, at last, was an intellectually forceful southerner demanding abolition
on moral grounds, amongst others. Linked to that, Helper’s southern identity
granted him a license to be blunt, allowing him to take his critique to a point that
might not have been acceptable from anyone else. To put it another way, Garrisonians
could forgive Helper’s excesses in a way that they could not a northern or a British
writer. Supporters and critics alike were fascinated to find that The Impending Crisis
was written by a native southerner claiming to speak for non-slaveholding whites.
This shocked the vast majority of southerners, some of whom simply could not
believe Helper was from the South, but delighted slavery’s opponents. Moreover,
Helper skilfully played on his identity as an ‘ordinary’ southerner as giving his argu-
ments authenticity and authority. It was an effective strategy, as the British response
essentially took Helper at his word in providing ‘[e]xact detail of their condition, furn-
ished to us by one of themselves’. Readers ‘may learn more from that book than from
any one single source’, stated the London Daily News, sentiments that were echoed fre-
quently elsewhere. Emily Shirreff, for example, gave two lectures to the ladies of the
London Emancipation Society on the subject ‘Chivalry of the South’, quoting exten-
sively from The Impending Crisis, which she speculated had ‘done more than anything
to convert Anti-slavery men into Abolitionists’. Much like African American abolition-
ists who attracted large audiences in Britain because it was assumed they had a direct
connection to slavery, Helper was accorded an authenticity to speak on southern
matters. He provided Anglo-American abolitionists with exactly what they needed
at that point.

It was the American side of the transatlantic movement, though, that most fully
grasped the potential of The Impending Crisis to push abolitionism into the political
forefront. If their first reaction was to delight at Helper’s fierce broadside against
southern planters, the more considered – and remarkably consistent – response
was the realisation that his book might influence the crucial 1860 presidential election.
Here was a text that was potentially dynamite in the fraught politics of slavery in the
1850s that had seen the formation and rapid growth of the Republican Party, which,
although by no means an abolitionist organisation, was committed to a free soil agenda. American abolitionists latched on to the tactical value of The Impending Crisis of the South in persuading former Whigs and discontented Democrats to switch their votes. ‘Whatever its effect at the South’, wrote Samuel May, ‘it will do vast good at the North, in many ways, and not least by shaming Northern Doughfaces into silence, or converting them into manly & outspoken opponents of Slavery’.19 Hopes were raised because The Impending Crisis was as uncompromising in its criticism of the North’s failure to end slavery as the South’s:

have the people of the North no interest in the United States as a nation, and do they not see that slavery is a great injury and disgrace to the whole country? ... Hitherto ... you have approached but half-way to the line of your duty; now, for ... the purpose of perpetuating this glorious Republic ... we ask you, in all seriousness, to organize yourselves as one man under the banners of Liberty, and to aid us in exterminating slavery.20

This was a gift to the abolitionist cause at a crucial historical moment. As the first line of a poem from the Liberator suggested: ‘Helper! thou comest in a time of need’.21 Even though committed Garrisonians supposedly held an apolitical position, refusing to engage with the corrupt and sinful political process, only the most hard-headed dared not to hope that Helper might influence the progress of emancipation by political means.

A laudatory review in the National Anti-Slavery Standard – the journal of the American Anti-Slavery Society – wrote that The Impending Crisis ‘deserves a wide circulation, North and South, in every State and every Territory’. It was ‘the most valuable anti-Slavery instrumentality existing’ to influence opinion in ‘Territories whose fate, in regard to the establishment of Slavery, is yet undecided’ because ‘Mr. Helper has proved Slavery as ruinous to the material interests of every community in which it exists’.22 Garrison’s Liberator did not formally review The Impending Crisis, but printed verbatim extracts from it arguing that immediate abolition was necessary because the North had surpassed the South economically. Two lines of commentary were written in the Liberator, however:

This is a remarkable work, to have been written by a Southern man, and in some respects more valuable than any other work that has yet appeared on the subject of slavery. It is a complete encyclopedia of facts and statistics and will be exceedingly useful for reference.23

Why did the leading abolitionist journal find The Impending Crisis ‘in some respects more valuable than any other work’? The most likely explanation is its tactical value in pushing abolitionism to the political forefront at a critical juncture in US history.

The problem of colonisation

Helper’s position was undeniably predicated upon the removal of freed slaves after emancipation. Even if recognising many positives in The Impending Crisis, how could abolitionists condone the last two points of Helper’s plan stipulating
colonisation? Points 10 and 11 proposed a form of gradual emancipation with a mandatory payment of US$60 for ‘each and every negro’ held in bondage, to pay for the costs of relocation and compensation (compensation to the enslaved, not to their owners). Should there be any slaves remaining after 1869, a further increase to US$100 annually was envisaged – ‘an infallible death-blow to slavery on or before the 4th of July, 1876’. Helper calculated that this would not only be ‘sufficient to land every negro in this country on the coast of Liberia’, but would provide financial support enabling freed slaves ‘to take the initiatory step in the walks of civilized life’. He also suggested they might be relocated to ‘Central or South America’ or even ‘to their Comfortable Settlement within the Boundaries of the United States’. The implicit paternalistic sentiment here was, of course, far from uncommon in the Atlantic world, and was a phenomenon that black abolitionists encountered within the abolitionist movement. On the face of it, Helper’s plan might appear reasonable, even in the best interests of both whites and blacks. Compensating slaves but not planters was an attractive, shrewd measure with great appeal among abolitionists, who uniformly detested the notion of compensation to slaveholders (which they regarded as tacit acceptance of the right to property in human beings).

There was no ambiguity whatsoever over the future of African Americans in The Impending Crisis, however. Genuine abolitionists were surely uncomfortable with Helper’s depiction of blacks as an unnatural element of the population who could not remain within the United States. ‘Confined to the original States in which it existed, the institution would soon have been disposed of by legislative enactments’, he rather naively suggested, thereby

> rid[ding] ourselves not only of African slavery, which is an abomination and a curse, but also of the negroes themselves, who . . . whether viewed in relation to their actual characteristics and condition, or through the strong antipathies of the whites, are . . . an undesirable population.

Reference to the ‘actual characteristics’ of blacks and ‘strong antipathies’ of whites suggests that Helper recognised the social construction of negative racial stereotypes and did not necessarily accept them wholesale. This distinction was also made by the ACS to further their cause, of course. In seeking to counter accusations of racial prejudice, colonisationists pointed towards the damaging and enduring racism that was debilitating to both races. Whether justified or not, racial prejudice was a reality that could only be remedied by total separation. Helper did not use environmental explanations in The Impending Crisis to justify colonisation; he did not have to because he openly stated his preference for whites. However, a sympathetic reader wanting to support his work might have condoned Helper’s stance by a selective reading of the text that somewhat lessened the racist implications of removal. Moreover, Helper stated that he advocated colonisation because of his ‘reasonable degree of fellow feeling for the negro’, and perhaps abolitionists simply forgave him for being misguided on this question, just as some of them had been in the 1820s. Others probably accepted that this was a position typical of a southerner. Helper’s peer Cassius Clay, and other Upper South anti-slavery and free soil advocates,
also believed colonisation was the best way to manage race relations after emancipation.\(^{28}\)

This was not a position consistent with the perspective of the egalitarian Anglo-American abolitionist, however, whether allied to Garrison or not. How white abolitionists who claimed to be working in the interests of black civil rights squared the circle of supporting Helper while knowing that he advocated colonisation is a tricky issue, even if accepting the argument for strategic expediency. The fact that Helper had no connections to the ACS and criticised it as a ‘farce’ possibly made this easier. Did abolitionists turn a blind eye, simply ignoring sections advocating colonisation? This was the case in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* review:

Written by a gentleman of North Carolina, dedicated to the non-slaveholding whites of the South, demanding immediate abolition . . . rejecting compromise . . . of every sort, setting forth a definite plan for *compelling* emancipation in case of its refusal by the slaveholders, calling upon non-slaveholding people of the South to organize . . . and presenting numerous and urgent reasons why they should join in a warfare . . . until slavery shall be utterly exterminated, this book is one of the most remarkable that our age has witnessed.

Colonisation was not mentioned, although the review noted Helper’s statement that he wrote ‘without any special friendliness or sympathy for blacks’. This line might have drawn criticism, but the review observed that writing primarily for southern whites was still ‘sufficient to make him the deadly enemy of slavery’ and that this should not lessen Helper’s appeal. The review ignored colonisation measures. However, Helper’s plan of action was printed in full – including points 10 and 11 on colonisation – so the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* somewhat defeated the objective of ‘airbrushing’ out the issue, if that, indeed, had been its intention. Other newspapers and journals also printed the plan in full, giving colonisation a prominence not only in the public arena, but in some abolitionist publications it had not received for decades. In short, colonisation could not easily be disassociated from abolition within *The Impending Crisis* because it was a core element of its agenda.\(^{29}\)

Contrast this with two reviews – one American, one British – which did not let Helper off the hook, clearly showing some abolitionists could not tolerate that most disagreeable aspect of *The Impending Crisis*. The short-lived *Radical Abolitionist*, the journal of the American Abolition Society founded in October 1855, was one of the less well-known publications. This group included former members of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society who had split from Garrison in the 1840s, including the Tappans, William Goodell and Gerrit Smith. It was dedicated to promoting racial equality, seeking to counter what some regarded as the racial backsliding implicit in those adopting a free soil position in the 1850s. The *Radical Abolitionist* review began in familiar fashion, praising *The Impending Crisis* ‘as a pioneer work of its class’ and commending its refusal to pay compensation to slaveholders but compensate the enslaved.

After a highly favourable assessment of the economic side of Helper’s argument, ‘regret’ was expressed about ‘the author’s adhesion to the absurd idea of separating
the races whom Slavery has already so indissolubly blended together’. This problem was excused on the grounds that ‘[w]e could not expect a non-slaveholder, from the interior of North Carolina, to agree with us at all points. The marvel is that we have, as yet, found so little to dissent from’. It further qualified that Helper wrote from a unique perspective ‘for the rights of his own class’. But that did not excuse him entirely:

The common brotherhood of the race, including the negro, is a topic that Mr Helper might profitably pay more attention to. The moral question in this struggle must be put in the front ground. The economical question has its place afterwards … And the highest pecuniary economy is in no way to be reached, but by cherishing a spirit of brotherly sympathy and impartial love for all men.

Somewhat unconvincingly, the review concluded, ‘Mr Helper does not mean to overlook this’, and chapters on religion and the Bible demonstrate ‘his own conscientious and hearty abhorrence, and moral condemnation of Slavery’. But sections ‘espousing the cause of the white man’, which ‘fall in with the idea that the blacks are a nuisance to be got rid of’ were ‘specks of incongruity that occasionally mar his book, and detract from its dignity, without adding to its power’. Most tellingly, the Radical Abolitionist printed only points one to nine of Helper’s plan, leaving out the last two on colonisation, stating: ‘then follow two more specifications, taxing slaveholders for the purpose already mentioned’. The review refused to print the word ‘colonisation’. It ended on a much more positive note, however, by praising Helper’s book as ‘an able and timely work’ whose ‘circulation, North and South, will do great good’.

The British Anti-Slavery Advocate was also highly complimentary, stating that Helper ‘is like the voice of a clarion’. But it also took issue with the suggestion that blacks were an ‘undesirable portion of the population’ and plans ‘to have them colonised’. Evidently, the Anti-Slavery Advocate, unlike the Radical Abolitionist, was prepared to use the term ‘colonisation’ in print, but it was equally firm in its rejection of Helper’s measures: being ‘not only unjust but impracticable, we do not coincide with them’. This point notwithstanding, the review was entirely complementary of The Impending Crisis and printed four pages of extracts from the text. However, printed verbatim among those extracts was Helper’s plan in full, somewhat undermining the rejection of colonisation! The Anti-Slavery Advocate expected that The Impending Crisis would have a wide impact:

As the writer is a Southerner … as his heart beats warmly for his native South, against whose slave system … he is avowedly hostile, his book is … amazingly clear sighted and is likely to be of immense service to the anti-slavery cause.

Helper’s background explained and excused colonisation in his book. These two reviews were as critical of The Impending Crisis as any found in the Anglo-American abolitionist press, but were hardly scathing. In fact, while pointing out flaws in Helper’s position, they were overwhelmingly positive about his work.

It was not only in printed reviews that these issues were raised. At the twenty-sixth meeting of the Massachusetts Antislavery Society on 29 January 1858, Henry C. Wright
read a letter from Helper explaining that he was exiled from North Carolina. Wright castigated the southern planters responsible. African American abolitionist Charles L. Remond was not so sure he deserved sympathy. 'I cannot accept the anti-slavery of Mr. Helper, nor of Mrs. Stowe, nor of Miss Griffith,' Remond said; 'When they will write a tale which shows a coloured man living in this country, a freeman, – when they will boldly demand this right for him ... then I can regard them as true and consistent abolitionists'. Remond, a ‘leading advocate of Garrisonian abolitionism’ according to Richard Blackett, could not condone colonisation. By April 1860, however – when excitement was mounting in anticipation of the presidential election – Remond had changed his mind. The Essex County Anti-Slavery Society, of which Remond was president, accepted Henry Wright’s resolution ‘[t]hat in Helper’s “Impending Crisis,” so generally endorsed by Republicans, we find the true and only scheme for the abolition of slavery’. There was no reference made to colonisation. A little over a month later, exactly the same motion was accepted by the much larger gathering of the New England Anti-Slavery Convention, which included leading Garrisonians. Charles C. Burleigh’s comment likely summed up the view of the majority there: he ‘would recommend its circulation, although he could not endorse fully all its contents’.

Evidence suggests that the Garrisonians were already aiding Helper before this date. The distribution committee of The Impending Crisis used the pages of the Liberator to publicise their efforts and provide updates on how the campaign was proceeding. In July 1859, the Liberator expressed regret that ‘of the $16,000 which it is proposed to raise by donation, in order that 100,000 copies of the work may be published ... only about one-fourth of that amount has been obtained’. Some Garrisonians contributed financially, including Samuel May, Jr., who stated it would be ‘disgraceful’ if his native Boston could not help raise the necessary funds. William Lloyd Garrison, who met Helper in July 1858 and found him ‘evidently in earnest, and [someone who] will not quail’, did not. Helper did not ask him for a financial contribution, presumably because he felt it would contravene Garrison’s well-known antipathy towards American politics. ‘I can feel no liberty to call on you for any subscription whatever’, Helper wrote. He did ask for something else, though: ‘the influence of your counsel in taking such steps as will lead to the speediest possible consummation of the enterprise’. Garrison seemingly followed through on this request. In October 1859, the executive committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society ‘voted to do the best in their power’ by taking 2000 copies of the compendium to be circulated ‘to the best of our ability and opportunity’. Should that be a success, they were willing to take more copies.

**Garrisonian political expediency**

Given this level of involvement, was the transatlantic abolitionist movement guilty of selective reading or, worse, colluding with colonisation plans? Even the two critical reviews of the book found reasons to condone Helper’s position. To what extent, if any, does acceptance of The Impending Crisis suggest that biracial abolitionism was waning by the late 1850s and that colonisation was gaining ground within the
transatlantic movement? It is undeniable that the strenuous denunciation of colonisation which marked the 1830s – one biographer called Garrison’s objection to colonisation a ‘vendetta’, such was the intensity of his opposition – was less evident 25 years on.37 It is difficult to imagine that abolitionists would have been so forgiving and accepting of a work advocating colonisation a generation earlier.

Perhaps this reflected the rising climate of racial prejudice, which was much more pervasive by the 1850s than it had been in the 1830s. Scientific racism had gained much wider acceptance in many quarters, becoming increasingly prominent in the Atlantic world across the nineteenth century.38 Indeed, the problem of white racism was the prime motivating factor in the Negro Emigration Movement of the 1850s. In the wake of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 – a bitter pill for black and white abolitionists to swallow – some prominent black leaders came to the conclusion that African Americans had no future in the United States. Martin Delany and Henry Highland Garnet resented what they perceived as second-class status within the abolitionist movement itself. As Delany put it in 1852:

Thus, was the cause espoused, and thus did we expect much. But in all this, we were doomed to disappointment ... Instead of realizing what we had hoped for, we find ourselves occupying the very same position in relation to our Anti-Slavery friends, as we do in relation to the proslavery part of the community – a mere secondary, underling position.39

Delany accurately points to the worsening position of free blacks during the antebellum period as rights were taken away and restrictions enforced, but he is somewhat harsh on many abolitionists who remained committed to biracial egalitarianism.

Delany was the leading figure at the National Emigration Convention in Cleveland in 1854 and became the main spokesman for black emigration from the United States, which initially focused on Central and South America and later Africa.40 He attracted limited support from African Americans, but had a better response in Britain in 1860, seeking alliances with those interested in securing alternative cotton supplies. As Howard Temperley argues, the British abolitionist movement had to some extent run out of steam by that time and was more receptive to proposals that would have been decisively rejected previously. Delany’s scheme, based on voluntary emigration, sought to build a colony in the Niger valley and capitalise on the movement to secure free cotton. Differences between colonisation and emigration to the casual observer were perhaps not obvious, especially to those outside of the United States. It might be that British abolitionists – for whom colonisation always had a different meaning to that of their American counterparts, in part because of British involvement in Sierra Leone – misinterpreted Helper’s call as related to Delany’s efforts in some way. They had read with great interest Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which might have re-established colonisation in their mindset. Moreover, Richard Blackett notes that the search for alternatives to American cotton had palpably changed long-held British views by the late 1850s, when ‘colonization and emigration were viewed by many as legitimate instruments of relieving the pressures of excess population’. Both certainly offered an easy compromise to those committed to
ending slavery, but simultaneously influenced by scientific arguments about black inferiority, who wondered if freed slaves were capable of living side by side with whites. The rise of free trade abolitionism in Britain in the 1840s and 1850s perhaps pushed the economic side of the abolitionist argument above the moral, even though to many they remained inseparable.41

On the American side, however, it would be wrong to suggest that the Garrisonian response was a clear sign of wavering on colonisation or a retreat from black civil rights. While each individual had their own unique response and no one explanation applies in every case, Garrison tried as hard as he could to balance his pressing desire for slavery’s end with his concern for black civil rights. His support for Helper’s book was a compromise made for political gain and he remained unequivocally opposed to colonisation. No doubt Garrison, and many other abolitionists, might legitimately be accused of treating blacks in a paternal fashion. This condescending approach is what upset Delany, and Frederick Douglass for that matter, although Douglass’s response was very different. But in a decade in which white supremacy was taken as a given in the United States and where the Supreme Court had denied blacks citizenship in the 1857 Dred Scott case, Garrison admirably stuck to his principles. While accepting The Impending Crisis in public for political purposes, there is evidence – all too sparse, unfortunately – indicating that he harboured reservations in private. Garrison and Wendell Phillips met Helper in the spring of 1859 to discuss the ‘anti-negro sentiments’ that they found objectionable in The Impending Crisis. As Helper recalled the conversation, he told Phillips that he approached writing his book without reference to race. Phillips stated his belief in the inherent equality of races, but Helper responded that he ‘preferred the white man, whom I regarded as the natural superior of the negro’ and asked Phillips for proof that this view was wrong.42

Lacking Phillips’ and Garrison’s account of this conversation, we do not know what they really made of Helper or his plans. They evidently tried to educate their North Carolinian ally. Both men continued to aid the campaign to distribute The Impending Crisis after that meeting, although Garrison’s efforts were not without limits. As we have seen, he did not contribute financially to the compendium fund, unlike a number of his peers, but his organisational influence – in the resolutions passed by his society and in his newspaper – provided essential support for the political campaign of mass circulation.43 The Liberator mentioned The Impending Crisis when it appeared in 1857, but, in contrast to other anti-slavery journals, never reviewed the book at length. Helper’s 11-point plan was not published in the Liberator. In July 1859 – shortly after Garrison’s face-to-face meeting with Helper – the Liberator praised the newly published compendium version as ‘incontestable in facts, irrefutable in argument, unimpeachable in testimony’ and a book that ‘will help to harmonize and consolidate all the noble elements of opposition to slavery’. This seems an obvious rallying cry to redouble efforts before the critical presidential election. Whatever Garrison personally felt, the opportunity to strike a decisive blow against slavery via Republican victory was too tempting to ignore.44
We might expect black abolitionists to have taken a different, more critical stance towards Helper – something that would perhaps put Garrison in a more negative light – but their response was much the same. Frederick Douglass did not meet Helper or review *The Impending Crisis*. He did mention the book once, when speaking in Bradford in January 1860:

The non-slave-holding element in the South was just now being appealed to in support of an effort to circulate a pamphlet, entitled ‘The Impending Crisis of the South.’ This pamphlet shewed [sic] that slavery was the enemy not only of the North and of black men, but also the decided enemy of the non-slave-holding white men in the Southern States.

Notably, Douglass found that Helper examined ‘slavery in a very able manner and exhibited its detrimental effects on the Union, nationally, individually, politically, socially, and morally’. Sarah Parker Remond also mentioned Helper at a lecture in Manchester in 1859: ‘To describe to you the miserable poor whites of the south, I need only quote the words of Mr. Helper, a southerner, in his important work on slavery. There was no more vocal critic of colonisation than Douglass, but even he did not publically denounce *The Impending Crisis*. Like his earlier acceptance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for the good it might do to the wider cause, in spite of Stowe’s association with colonisation – a problem over which he argued vigorously with Delany – Douglass seemingly recognised the strategic significance of Helper’s book.

Garrison never wavered in his stance on colonisation. In May 1861, he decisively rejected the relocation of blacks to Haiti:

I have always strenuously opposed the scheme of the American Colonization Society, – not because it proposed to aid such colored persons as might wish to go to Africa, in order to better their condition, for this might be a generous act under appropriate circumstances, – but solely on account of the iniquitous doctrines and hateful designs of that Society, all tending to perpetuate slavery, and to make the condition of the free colored population as hopeless as possible in this their native land.

But Garrison’s rejection was not just of the ACS, but of colonisation in general:

This is their native land. Here they are to remain, as a people . . . here they are gradually, but surely, to rise in the scale of civilization and improvement; here their fetters are to be broken, and their rights restored.

Garrison hoped that with slavery’s end, ‘[c]omplexional prejudice shall swiftly disappear, injurious distinctions cease, and peace and good will everywhere reign’, demonstrating that his egalitarian views on black civil rights remained, even if they were tinged with paternalism.

It is not inconceivable that Garrison might have taken a different view. The racial climate had worsened considerably since his critique of colonisation appeared in 1832. When Helper asked Wendell Phillips to disprove theories of white superiority, scientific orthodoxy was on Helper’s side, not Phillips’. Garrison, though, fundamentally stuck to his belief in racial equality. Despite aiding in the circulation of a book
advocating colonisation, he continued to oppose the relocation of African Americans, in whatever form the proposal might take. Moreover, his efforts — and indeed those of all abolitionists — to circulate *The Impending Crisis* were vital. The advantages of hindsight can sometimes be dubious, but in this case the right call was made — Helper’s book, unlike George Weston’s, was one of the significant contributory factors in the coming of the war, a war eventually leading to the destruction of slavery.

The political sensitivity of the Garrisonians has extremely important historiographical implications. James Brewer Stewart has recently urged scholars to reconsider the relationship between abolitionism and national politics. There is no better evidence connecting the Garrisonians to electoral politics than their involvement with *The Impending Crisis*. William Lloyd Garrison, in particular, is shown in a new light as being far more politically savvy than previously understood. Astonishingly, none of Garrison’s numerous biographers has noted his link to Helper. As the American abolitionist movement reached the end of its third decade, it seemed as though there might finally be light at the end of the tunnel and that slavery might be ended by political means. William Lloyd Garrison, and others in his circle, rejected colonisation but promoted *The Impending Crisis* for strategic reasons, demonstrating their responsiveness to the public and political mood, and corresponding willingness to put aside dogmatic conventions.48

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**Notes**


[23] Liberator, 3 July 1857, 105.


[26] Helper, Impending Crisis, 97.

[27] Ibid., 26.


[32] Liberator, 5 February 1858, 22; Blackett, Building an Antislavery Wall, 214.

[33] Liberator, 20 April 1860, 63.

[34] Ibid., 8 June 1860, 90.

[35] Ibid., 1 April 1859, 60; 29 July 1859, 118 (quote), 120.


[43] *Liberator*, 1 April 1859, 60; 29 July 1859, 120.

[44] Ibid., 29 July 1859, 118; Hinton Rowan Helper to Maria Weston Chapman, 23 January 1860.


