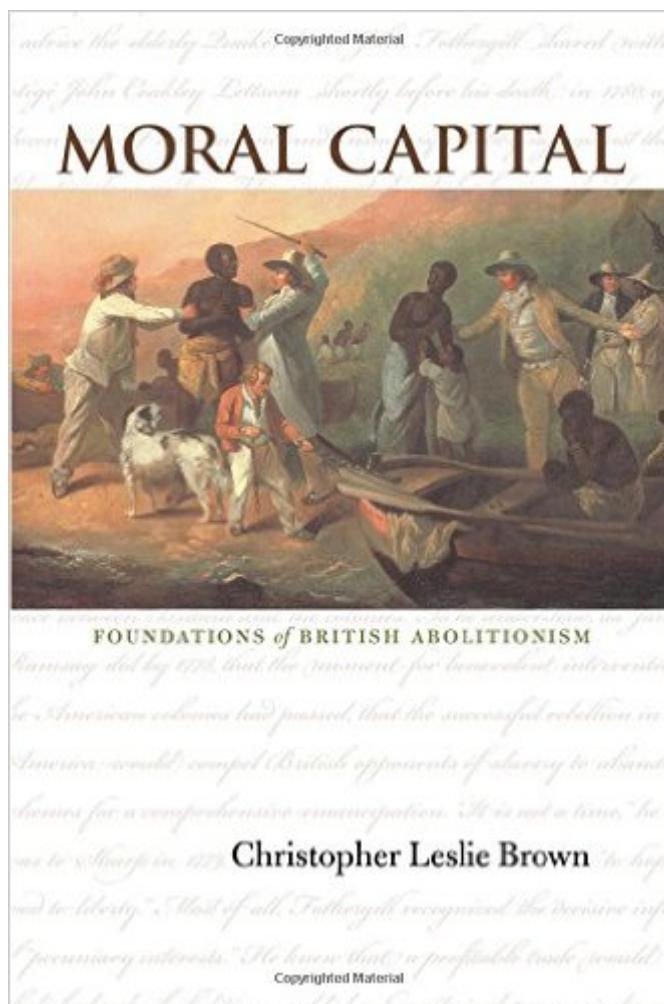


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Moral Capital: Foundations Of British Abolitionism (Published For The Omohundro Institute Of Early American History And Culture)



Synopsis

Revisiting the origins of the British antislavery movement of the late eighteenth century, Christopher Leslie Brown challenges prevailing scholarly arguments that locate the roots of abolitionism in economic determinism or bourgeois humanitarianism. Brown instead connects the shift from sentiment to action to changing views of empire and nation in Britain at the time, particularly the anxieties and dislocations spurred by the American Revolution. The debate over the political rights of the North American colonies pushed slavery to the fore, Brown argues, giving antislavery organizing the moral legitimacy in Britain it had never had before. The first emancipation schemes were dependent on efforts to strengthen the role of the imperial state in an era of weakening overseas authority. By looking at the initial public contest over slavery, Brown connects disparate strands of the British Atlantic world and brings into focus shifting developments in British identity, attitudes toward Africa, definitions of imperial mission, the rise of Anglican evangelicalism, and Quaker activism. Demonstrating how challenges to the slave system could serve as a mark of virtue rather than evidence of eccentricity, Brown shows that the abolitionist movement derived its power from a profound yearning for moral worth in the aftermath of defeat and American independence. Thus abolitionism proved to be a cause for the abolitionists themselves as much as for enslaved Africans.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Moral Capital is a powerful and intricate exploration of the ideas and motives that underlay the

British anti-slavery movement. Brown begins by positing that moral disapproval alone is not sufficient to end a practice like slavery-- the issue must acquire weight in the public mind and must attract individuals who are willing to devote time, energy, and creativity to creating a concrete plan to end it. He illuminates the tangled motives of the early abolitionists; some sought to help the British empire adjust to a new geopolitical reality in the wake of American independence, while the vigorous evangelical wing of the movement sought to save souls. Brown suggests that, had the American Revolution not occurred, emancipation might have been more difficult to achieve-- not because the moral will wasn't there, but because ending slavery would have been seen as a politically divisive move in a fragile empire. As another reviewer noted, this is a long, dense book, laden with historiographical musings, and it can be slow going. It is more suitable for scholars than for popular readers. But if you persevere through all 462 pages, your patience will be rewarded with valuable insights not just into the history of British anti-slavery, but also into the structural dynamics of moral movements in general.

An absorbing and lucidly written analysis of the origins of abolitionism. The focus on the role of the American Revolution was new to me, and persuasive. Brown has mastered an enormous volume of primary and secondary literature on early abolitionism, and it is presented in a way that is easy to read. Most interesting is Brown's explanation of the role of contingencies -- personalities, multiple motivations, and the subjective sense of "who we are" -- in the development of social movements premised on moral appeals. The book would have been better if it had been 20% shorter, but one can't ask for much more. I really enjoyed it!

This is one of the most interesting studies of Britain's abolitionists that I have read. I found it to be highly readable and written at a level that does not require doctorate in the subject to understand it. The general thrust is that the American Revolution and the general crisis surrounding it gave many would-be reformers in Britain to pause and take stock. This process led to abolitionism. Sure, people might take jabs at some of the author's assumption and conclusion, but what makes this book so great is that it provokes discussion in a way that too few books do. The author doesn't hide behind a bunch of jargon or detailed historiography. He makes a bold statement and then does his best to support it. More history should be written this way.

This is a great attempt to understand how the British turned against the enslavement of Africans. It is sad to note that it took a bloody Civil War, the worse conflict involving Americans, to end slavery

on these shores.

Brown tries to delve into abolitionists' motives. The result is an overly long book full of equivocations. It's a hodge-podge, wherein on one page, he questions the abolitionists' sincerity because they objected to slavery on religious grounds and on another page he admits that they were dedicated to abolition as an end in itself. And so it goes on and on and on....very slowly and with no apparent end, or resolution, in sight.

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