smallholders on the island. Besides giving tenants and squatters a political platform to advocate and access to political power, the escheat movement forced an end to landlordism by reducing political support for it. Moreover, escheat altered how politicians on the island and in Britain regarded questions of land ownership in a society in which political and economic autonomy depended on owning a freehold.

*Rural Protest* goes beyond the confines of the history of Prince Edward Island and Canada. It offers a point of comparative analysis for conflicts over land ownership, the emergence of rural people’s relationship to the land, and of the basis of rural collective action in North America and beyond. In short, this is an excellent study.

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In *Slavery on Trial: Law, Abolitionism, and Print Culture*, Jeannine Marie DeLombard analyzes the trope of the criminal trial that appeared with notable frequency in antislavery literature produced during the antebellum period. DeLombard’s eloquent study places the literary strategies abolitionists employed in a whole new light. Indeed, those who come into contact with DeLombard’s book will never again peruse a piece of abolitionist literature without being conscious of the ways in which it incorporates aspects of the trial trope, or of the important cultural implications of the author’s use of that trope.

DeLombard argues that in the metaphor of the criminal trial proceeding, abolitionists found a way to recast both themselves and the African Americans whose cause they had taken up in a more positive light with the northern public. The trial trope allowed abolitionists, who for most of the 1830s had been viewed as dangerous criminals, to redefine themselves as righteous advocates for individual rights, and slaveholders as the unscrupulous lawbreakers who habitually violated those rights. By the same token, DeLombard points out, white Americans had traditionally encountered African Americans in a public role or in print only when they were confessing to a crime. DeLombard shows the power of the trial metaphor, as abolitionists employed it, to transform slaves or former slaves from guilty criminals into innocent witnesses able to testify to the slaveholding cruelties they had seen and experienced firsthand. In doing so, abolitionists provided a public space for African Americans to use the voice that was officially denied them in the nation’s courts.

By taking the slaves’ case to the public through the medium of print culture, abolitionists were also able to circumvent a judicial process that Americans had increasingly begun to regard as unresponsive to the will of the people. As the power of the jury in American legal proceedings diminished in favor of enhanced power for judges, abolitionists capitalized on popular discontent with this trend, according to DeLombard, by moving disputes over slavery from the courtroom to the printed
In this “typographical tribunal,” as DeLombard refers to it, the opinions of ordinary citizens held sway. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, abolitionists finally began to convince the northern public that the “Slave Power” played a vital part in depriving them of their rightful role as the arbiters of justice within the judicial system. The 1850 law denied suspected fugitives a jury trial and put decisions about their status entirely in the hands of a judge. Thus, when northern readers of abolitionist materials rendered a verdict of guilty against slaveholders in the 1850s, it was for infringing on the liberties of white Americans by hijacking the justice system, not for violating the rights of the African Americans they kept in bondage.

This conclusion puts a fresh, legalistic spin on current conventional wisdom among antebellum historians about the non-humanitarian reasons white northerners ultimately embraced antislavery sentiment during the 1850s. DeLombard’s study goes further, however, using her analysis of the trial trope in abolitionist literature to enhance our understanding of the subordination of African Americans both within the abolitionist movement and in antebellum society as a whole. Rather than affirming other scholars’ suggestions that the ability to testify publicly, either in speeches or in print, against the slave system marked a newfound power for African Americans in antebellum society, DeLombard points to the subjectivity that the role of witness reinforced for African Americans seeking a place in the American polity. In her words, while “appearing to create a workable model for both interracial collaboration and black civic agency, the widespread habit of patterning the slavery controversy on the criminal trial also constrained that collaboration and circumscribed that agency by subordinating the public contributions of African American ‘witnesses’ to that of their white ‘advocates.’” (26) Yet DeLombard refuses to dwell on the victimization of former slaves within the antislavery movement, focusing instead on the efforts of black activists to counter attempts to keep them rhetorically confined to the witness stand. Slavery on Trial thus provides a literary-based demonstration of black abolitionists’ attempts to transform the images of African Americans that prevailed in both the antislavery movement and in American culture at large.

In offering contemporary critiques of abolitionists’ use of the trial trope, DeLombard provides a highly original re-reading of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel Dred, presenting it as evidence of Stowe’s frustration with the abolitionist strategy of relying on whites to advocate for the African American cause of abolition—a strategy Stowe had obviously employed, and had been criticized for, when she wrote Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

Overall, DeLombard provides a rich, nuanced study of popular legal consciousness, racial conflict, and the power of the printed word in antebellum America.

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