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William the Liberator

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BookTalk

WILLIAM THE LIBERATOR

By Jeffrey Rogers Hummel

All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery

By Henry Mayer

St. Martin's Press, 707 pages, \$32.50

No one attacked the black slavery of the South with greater vehemence than a group of young, radical abolitionists who burst upon the American landscape in the early 1830s. Exasperated by the betrayal of the Revolutionary promise that all forms of human bondage would disappear in this new land of liberty, and marshaling the evangelical fervor of the religious revivals then sweeping the country, they demanded nothing less than the immediate emancipation of all slaves. Not only did they oppose any compensation to slaveholders; they also demanded full political rights for all blacks, North and South.

The most influential and vitriolic of these abolitionists was William Lloyd Garrison. From Boston on January 1, 1831, the 25-year-old editor brought out the first issue of a new weekly paper, *The Liberator*. Garrison left no doubt about his refusal to compromise with the sin of slavery:

I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen;—but urge me not to use

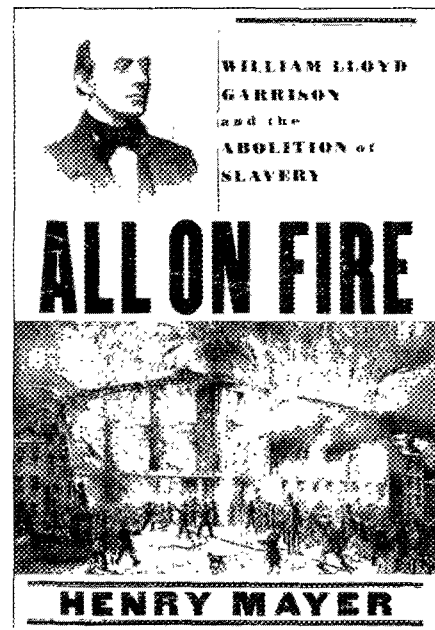
moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.”

The pioneering editor, however, did not look to direct political action to eradicate slavery. Moral suasion and nonviolent resistance were his strategies. By early 1842 Garrison had gone so far as to denounce the U.S. Constitution for its pro-slavery clauses that made “a covenant with death and an agreement with hell.” He publicly burned a copy during one Fourth of July celebration, proclaiming, “So perish all compromises with tyranny!” He believed that, if anything, the North should secede from the central government. The slogan “No Union with Slave-Holders” was blazoned for years on the masthead of Garrison’s newspaper.

The Liberator continued to appear every week without interruption—in the face of recurrent financial difficulties, antagonism from respectable leaders throughout the North, and even an enraged mob that almost lynched its editor—until the Thirteenth Amendment was enacted to abolish slavery, 35 years after the paper’s founding.

Garrison has not been adequately served by historians. The all-too-common inclination has been to portray him as intolerant, a zealot whose activities were far less constructive than those of other more cautious, less conspicuous opponents of slavery. Biographers, when not openly hostile, have tended to patronize him with excessive psychologizing.

But at last, a biography has been published that is worthy of the man. Henry Mayer, author of *A Son of Thunder*, probably the best study of Patrick Henry, has



outdone himself with his new book on Garrison. Rarely can one writer cover an intellectual’s ideal and personal life with equal facility. But Mayer seamlessly integrates all dimensions of Garrison’s life. Indeed, Mayer’s eye for detail—from the drudgery of an apprentice printer, to the warm family life of a prominent agitator—makes this one of the most realistic, authentic biographies I have ever had the pleasure of reading. I finished it with a sense of knowing Garrison intimately, even though he inhabited an era when people had religious commitments so encompassing as to be utterly alien to our modern, secular culture.

The abolitionist movement went through schism after schism. Mayer presents a sensitive, insightful exposition of Garrison’s advocacy of disunion, his denunciation of the Constitution, his opposition to voting and to political parties, his anarchism and pacifism, his early and hearty support for women’s rights, and his disillusionment with and rejection of organized churches. In the end, Mayer makes a strong case that without the inflammatory but compelling writing, speaking, and organizing of Garrison, there may have been no effective abolitionist movement at all.

The biography possesses a few flaws. When discussing the views of other individuals, especially politicians, Mayer is sometimes unfair and occasionally in er-

ror. For instance, contrary to what Mayer implies, the Liberty Party never argued that the central government could or should prohibit slavery within individual states. And when the prospect of finally ridding the country of human bondage during the Civil War seduced Garrison into compromising and supporting Lincoln and the Republican party, Mayer sympathizes with his subject too much.

But better a biography that is overly sympathetic than yet another harsh denunciation of Garrison the wild-eyed fanatic. Mayer's flaws are so trivial they hardly dim the luster of this inspiring work.

Jeffrey Rogers Hummel is the author of Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men: A History of the American Civil War.

THE WIT OF NATIONS

By David R. Henderson

Eat the Rich

By P. J. O'Rourke

Atlantic Monthly Press, 246 Pages, \$24

Since 1776, when Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*, countless volumes have been written by people who call themselves economists, but in those 200-plus years, no one has tried to write books about economics that are purposely funny. Finally, however, there is such a book. It is *Eat the Rich* (I guess that title beats *Steal This Book*) by P. J. O'Rourke, the humorist and columnist for *Rolling Stone*.

O'Rourke addresses the most important question in economics: "Why do some places prosper and thrive while others just suck?" Adam Smith dealt with that same question. So think of O'Rourke as a modern Adam Smith, with these two differences: O'Rourke's data are more recent, and you'll get side-splitting laughs on every page.

O'Rourke leads off by junking the notion that a brilliant mind is sufficient, or even necessary, to generate wealth. "No part of the earth (with the possible exception of Brentwood) is dumber than Beverly Hills," he says, "and the residents are wading in gravy.

In Russia, meanwhile, where chess is a spectator sport, they're boiling stones for soup." Nor is education the answer. "Fourth graders in the American school system know what a condom is but aren't sure about 9 x 7."

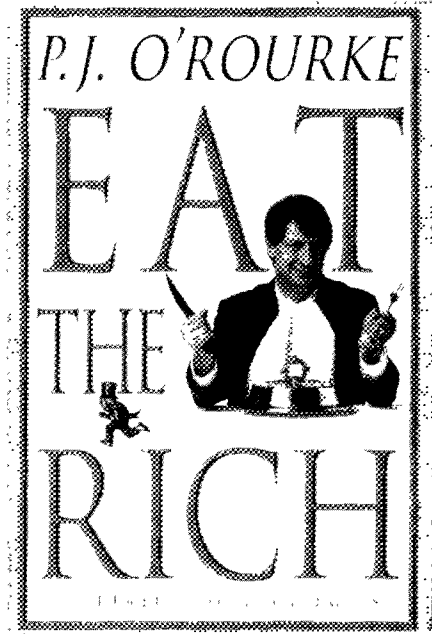
Why not figure out what makes economies rich by reading an economics textbook? O'Rourke lists a number of reasons, one of which is the prose style of the typical economics text: "puerile and impenetrable, *Goodnight Moon* rewritten by Henry James."

Style isn't O'Rourke's only objection to economics textbooks; he says the content is typically questionable, too. O'Rourke quotes famous MIT economist Paul Samuelson: "Marx was wrong about many things...but that does not diminish his stature as an important economist." Asks O'Rourke: "Well, what would? If Marx was wrong about many things and screwed the baby-sitter?"

Always, O'Rourke expresses economic ideas in humorous, understandable ways. Here he is on bond ratings. "A D-rated bond is like money lent to a younger brother. An AAA-rated bond is like money lent to a younger brother by the Gambino family."

To explain what kinds of economic systems work and what ones don't, he takes you on his travels—to Sweden, Cuba, Albania, Tanzania, Hong Kong, Russia, and Shanghai. O'Rourke notes that in Sweden, which practices "Good Socialism," workers get unlimited sick leave with no reduction in pay rate. He writes: "During a brief period of nonsocialist rule in 1991, a one-day waiting period for sick-leave benefits was instituted. An enormous drop in Monday and Friday worker illnesses resulted—one of the medical miracles of the twentieth century."

O'Rourke is less funny when he discusses Cuba ("Bad Socialism")—understandable, given that Cuba keeps a higher proportion of the population as political prisoners than any other country on earth. But even in discussing Cuba, O'Rourke launches some great lines. Pointing out that private restaurants are allowed so long as they employ only family members, O'Rourke writes: "It will be interesting to see how this model works



if it's applied to other free enterprise undertakings, such as airlines. Mom will begin beverage service as soon as Junior gets the landing gear up."

O'Rourke's ruminations on the Russian economy are dead-on funny. How about this for a succinct statement of the problems with Communism:

If a shoe factory was told to produce 1,000 shoes, it produced 1,000 baby shoes, because these were the cheapest and easiest to make. If it was told to produce 1,000 men's shoes, it made them all in one size. If it was told to produce 1,000 shoes in a variety for men, women, and children, it produced 998 baby shoes, one pump, and one wing tip. If it was told to produce 3,000 pounds of shoes, it produced one enormous pair of concrete sneakers.

When the Russian government allowed people to bring back \$2,000 in duty-free imports, Russians reacted. "Clothing, toys, and small appliances were packed into enormous burlap sacks so that the baggage-claim area of any Russian airport with international flights seemed to be populated by hundreds of Santa Clauses in their off-duty clothes." During O'Rourke's four-day trip on the famed Trans-Siberian Railroad across Russia, he sat on the south side of the train, with no fan, no ventilation, no