



## **The People's Martyr: Thomas Wilson Dorr and His 1842 Rhode Island Rebellion**

*Erik J. Chaput*

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In 1840s Rhode Island, the state's seventeenth-century colonial charter remained in force and restricted suffrage to property owners, effectively disenfranchising 60 percent of potential voters. Thomas Wilson Dorr's failed attempt to rectify that situation through constitutional reform ultimately led to an armed insurrection that was quickly quashed--and to a stiff sentence for Dorr himself. Nevertheless, as Erik Chaput shows, the Dorr Rebellion stands as a critical moment of American history during the two decades of fractious sectional politics leading up to the Civil War. This uprising was the only revolutionary republican movement in the antebellum period that claimed the people's sovereignty as the basis for the right to alter or abolish a form of government. Equally important, it influenced the outcomes of important elections throughout northern states in the early 1840s and foreshadowed the breakup of the national Democratic Party in 1860.

Through his spellbinding and engaging narrative, Chaput sets the rebellion in the context of national affairs--especially the abolitionist movement. While Dorr supported the rights of African Americans, a majority of delegates to the "People's Convention" favored a whites-only clause to ensure the proposed constitution's passage, which brought abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, Parker Pillsbury, and Abby Kelley to Rhode Island to protest. Meanwhile, Dorr's ideology of the people's sovereignty sparked profound fears among Southern politicians regarding its potential to trigger slave insurrections.

Drawing upon years of extensive archival research, Chaput's book provides the first scholarly biography of Dorr, as well as the most detailed account of the rebellion yet published. In it, Chaput tackles issues of race and gender and carries the story forward into the 1850s to examine the transformation of Dorr's ideology into the more familiar refrain of popular sovereignty.

Chaput demonstrates how the rebellion's real aims and significance were far broader than have been supposed, encompassing seemingly conflicting issues including popular sovereignty, antislavery, land reform, and states' rights. *The People's Martyr* is a definitive look at a key event in our history that further defined the nature of American democracy and the form of constitutionalism we now hold as inviolable.

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