

Book Review:

*Sons of Providence-The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution*

Author: Charles Rappleye

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America, as both a colony of England and a fledgling nation struggling for freedom, was confronted by a number of social, moral, and economic dilemmas that had to be addressed skillfully by the diverse men that sought to lead each of the thirteen original colonies. In his book, Sons of Providence, Charles Rappleye adds John and Moses Brown to that group of diverse statesmen who helped form what would become the United States of America. Rappleye's account of the lives of John and Moses Brown is intricate and while at times exhaustive, offers a way of examining and perhaps generalizing the struggles of early America through the struggles between two siblings. To be sure, John and Moses Brown were "men of action who lived lives of commitment and zeal, deeply engaged in the challenges and the achievements of their time."<sup>1</sup> However, it is through the differing ways they addressed this commitment that we gain a more complete view of America before and in the infancy of its independence.

Rappleye takes great care to detail the social and moral development of these two men as their lives take on separate and yet always intertwining paths. His focus on how each man confronted the economic realities and moral implications of slavery serves not only as a good history lesson for students of the condition and circumstances of slavery in New England prior to emancipation, but it also echoes work by a variety of other historians seeking to understand slavery in a geographic area and era rampant with talk of freedom and liberty for all *men*. The confrontation of these seemingly divergent ideas (i.e. men preaching freedom while concurrently holding others in absolute bondage) is always difficult to understand. Therefore, sections of Rappleye's book would also be useful for high school students seeking to comprehend how general ideas such as religion and economics confronted the realities of slavery and at least partially defined what it meant to be free, a slave, and a citizen.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Rappleye, *Sons of Providence-The Brown Brothers, The Slave Trade, and the American Revolution*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 1.

From the beginning, Rappleye makes clear that his book is not only a fresh look at history, but also a study in *American character*. That is, he details the lives of John and Moses Brown as some of the first Americans to embody the qualities of social justice and reform as well as that of unfettered capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, while Moses Brown represents the reform minded and religiously inspired individual; John Brown represents the American capitalist who is adamant in his resolve that nothing should stand in the way of earning profit and that no one should constrain his definition of property. The first two chapters of the book are concerned with examining and explaining the lives of the extended Brown family, their importance in relation to other prominent Rhode Island families (i.e. the Wantons, Jenckes, Hopkins, etc), the social-economic profile of the Rhode Island and Providence Plantations colony, and the upbringing of John and Moses Brown. In these chapters, Rappleye describes the conditions or environment in which the Browns grew up. He describes them as being “defined by concentric circles of powerful influences—family and town, colony and empire, God and King—and yet within that framework they were essentially, intrinsically autonomous, guided by instinct and character.”<sup>3</sup> He details at length the development of the city of Providence, the importance of the Browns in the growth of the city and its competition with New England’s pre-revolutionary center of trade and culture: the city of Newport, Rhode Island. Rappleye is careful to note that from their upbringing into early adulthood, the Brown brothers were close confidants on matters of business and society and it would be their joint foray into the slave trade that would eventually sever some of those close ties.

Subsequent chapters of the book examine the failed slaving venture involving their ship, the *Sally*, and the Brown Brother’s decision to separate their shipping interests while maintaining shared investment in their chandleries, iron-works, and rum distilleries. The decision to divide

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<sup>2</sup> IBID, 4.

<sup>3</sup> IBID, 28.

shipping interests comes after a failed attempt to enter the slave trade in which the death of the majority of Africans on the transatlantic route and the costly duration of the expedition with the loss of cargo other than slaves (i.e. a loss of 10% of their rum) leads John and Moses Brown to a divergence of opinion on the economic benefits of the slave trade. Rappleye further asserts that the Brown Brother's entrance into the slave trade seems almost inevitable given the post French/Indian War depression and the profit to be had from such ventures.<sup>4</sup> The assertion is illuminating, but far too simple given that there is no mention of and a lack of sources in the *notes* about the influences of abolitionists working in the North. Still, his thesis holds clear that it would be profit vs. ideology that would separate these two men in future business ventures. It would also lead Moses away from accepting slavery as both just and correct through religious conversion while John would continue to fight for the preservation of his freedom to define property as he wished.

Rappleye's discussion of the ethics of slavery and the time he devotes to explaining this helps to rid the reader of modern conceptions of slavery's immorality and to focus them on understanding slavery within the context and environment in which it existed in the North. Since modern citizens of the western world are so far removed from thinking that owning another person is in anyway just or appropriate, it is helpful when Rappleye distills his explanation of slavery in New England suggesting that "the idea that there was something wrong with trafficking in humankind was still just a glimmer on the ethical horizon."<sup>5</sup> Here, Rappleye agrees with other historians who have noted that "whites [in New England] across a spectrum of belief held a common set of assumptions about the limits and possibilities of the behavior and mental

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<sup>4</sup> IBID, 55.

<sup>5</sup> IBID, 56

capacity of enslaved people of color.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Rappleye suggests that “the Brown’s slaveholding was not exceptional. While the institution was always stronger and more advanced in the southern colonies, it was present throughout the British Settlement...and in Providence, slaveholding was the mark of the elite.”<sup>7</sup> Here, Rappleye echoes historians who have suggested that “the northern commitment to slavery emerged first in the great port cities where slaveownership (sic) became nearly universal among the urban elite and commonplace among the middling sort.”<sup>8</sup> Certainly, Rappleye’s discussion of Moses Brown’s transformation to Quaker abolitionist (chapter 6) in contrast to John’s continued pro-slavery stance attempts to relieve the “historical amnesia about slavery in New England which has a history as old as the history of the local slavery itself.”<sup>9</sup>

At the core of Rappleye’s book is the idea that although John and Moses broke on matters of conscience, the question of the continued practice of slavery, and the efficacy of the American Revolution, they never officially or publically severed ties. This is apparent in Rappleye’s discussion of the seizure of John Brown’s ship, *Abigail*, and his actions against British authorities who were taking bold steps to reign in their colonist’s economic activities with taxes and regular searches and seizures of colonial property. In what is a sound case study in the divergent character of colonial leaders, Rappleye suggests that the Brown brothers had “realized and adopted clashing identities- John was the fighting patriot; Moses, though not a Tory, was a

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<sup>6</sup> Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery-Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-1860*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Rappleye, *Sons of Providence-The Brown Brothers, The Slave Trade, and the American Revolution*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 57.

<sup>8</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity-A history of African-American Slaves*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003), 81.

<sup>9</sup> Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery-Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-1860*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), xiii.

conscientious objector who opposed fighting on principled grounds.”<sup>10</sup> Again, Moses’ principle’s were grounded in his conversion to Quaker beliefs of non-violence while John, eschewing such a conversion, maintained his right to own, maintain, and profit from his property.

The remainder of Rappleye’s book examines Moses’ efforts to ward off the revolution through diplomacy and John’s direct aid towards the war effort. After the war, Rappleye takes up a discussion of Moses and John’s often public debates over the slavery issue and how to settle it in the formation and ratification of the 1789 Constitution. Throughout these final chapters, Rappleye sticks close to his thesis that the Brown brothers are a true case study in the contradictory character of America’s founding fathers. Like Thomas Jefferson who denounced slavery in public and yet continued to practice it in the hopes of economic prosperity or George Washington who rarely provided any opinion on the morality of slavery and yet freed his slaves upon his death, John and Moses Brown left behind ample documentation that aids one in understanding the division over this issue in northern society in both the pre and post revolution era.

Later generations have come to know Moses and John Brown as the founders of elite institutions of higher education and early leaders of the state of Rhode Island. What many may not know and what Rappleye evinces through every page of his book is the intimate and profound legacy these two men left behind on the moral question of slavery: a question that has profound implications for understanding not only our history, but modern American society.<sup>11</sup> This understanding is critical for high school students seeking to truly know what it has meant and what it means to be a slave, a freeman, and a citizen of the United States. To this end, portions of Rappleye’s book are extremely useful.

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Rappleye, *Sons of Providence-The Brown Brothers, The Slave Trade, and the American Revolution*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 168.

<sup>11</sup> IBID, 344.

Rappleye's book, because of all of its intricate discussions and often exhaustive documentation, poses both an opportunity and a dilemma for a high school history teacher wishing to use it as an aid to understanding slavery in the pre and post revolutionary periods. Rappleye's book is ripe with opportunity to discuss and demonstrate just how divisive slavery was in the North. It certainly would be helpful in dispelling the still somewhat persistent myth that all New Englanders were always benevolent do-gooders working tirelessly to free slaves from evil southern plantation owners and slave-traders. The dilemma appears not only in the language that Rappleye uses, because this is clearly a book written for an informed audience with an elaborate vocabulary, but also in the length of the discussion as well. Fortunately, providing some prior knowledge and a few vocabulary lessons can alleviate these two minor dilemmas. A deeper understanding of the ideological battle over slavery, which is the central theme of the book, requires however a somewhat more nuanced pedagogical approach.

As aforementioned, Rappleye's book provides the perfect case study to understand how slavery existed and what people thought about it in New England. To aid students in fully understanding this case study, using a thematic approach which asks students to at pre-lesson, during the lesson, and post lesson<sup>12</sup> to define slavery, freedom, and to examine what they believe and what they now know to be the *condition of slavery* may be the most useful in helping them to understand slavery in New England. It would also be useful and illustrative to engage in a discussion of how religion can affect moral sentiment and public action. This would help explain Moses Brown's sudden conversion from apathy toward slavery to complete denouncement of the institution later in life. Using smaller portions of the book, particularly chapters 6 and 10, which detail very closely Moses and John's battle over slavery, are particularly practical. Rappleye provides ample background explanation throughout each chapter and he is careful to define

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<sup>12</sup> Here, using a graphic organizer like a KWL chart may be useful in helping to organize students' knowledge as well as their deficiencies in knowledge.

exactly the physical, social, and economic environment in which this question of slavery is debated. While many students may still have some questions about the cause-effect relationship between slavery and the American Revolution, Rappleye considerable documentation of facts allows for more multiple examples and chance to re-teach each theme.

The greatest strength of this work (from a secondary school pedagogical perspective) is that Rappleye writes it with the modern reader in mind. Throughout the book, especially when it comes to the issue of slavery, he is careful to take into consideration that students (and people in general) in the modern era find it hard to believe that American society could have ever permitted the ownership of one person by another. The author addresses this concern carefully and with consistency, making sure that he provides ample explanation of John Brown's pro-slavery stance and Moses Brown's sudden religious conversion as well as the social/economic/historical effects of those stances. Moreover, Sons of Providence, takes a detailed look, with many assertions echoed by fellow historians, at the economic, ideological and social implications of the very complex institution of slavery. It is an institution and an idea that is integral for all Americans to understand and one which is often illusive for many high school students who see it as too complex and having no direct connection with their own lives or histories. To a certain extent, Rappleye's work restores some of that significance. If this work is used with care towards and a knowledge of best practices for students learning, high school aged learners may be able to understand slavery more intricately and adopt its lessons for modern application.

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