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Rappleye, Charles. *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.

On the eve of the American Revolution and during the early Republic, Americans struggled with ideals of liberty, justice, freedom, and independence. Many struggled with the decision to wage a war for independence and with how to turn thirteen independent colonies into a unified and united, new nation. Political issues were only further complicated by the economic and social struggles as conflicts developed between merchants and farmers; urban and rural residents; abolitionists and slave owners plagued the growing nation. In *Sons of Providence: the Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution*, Charles Rappleye examined the history of the United States from 1736 to 1836 while focusing on Rhode Island and the Brown family. Through Rappleye's descriptions of the Brown brother's lives, he examined the Brown family's coming of age within the context of the United States coming of age. Through this approach, Rappleye explored numerous local issues that quickly became national concerns, such as taxation, the fight for liberty, political ideals, slavery, religious conflicts, and economic concerns. Rappleye used the Brown family to highlight the many dilemmas facing the new nation as it tried to find a balance between different political, economic, social, and religious interests and ideals.

Rappleye provided a thorough and well-written study of the Brown family and Rhode Island history during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Rappleye began his account with an analysis of the family. James Brown was a prominent Providence, RI

merchant who was always willing to try new business ventures, from a retail store, slaughterhouse, wharves, and an attempt at slave trading. According to Rappleye, Rhode Islanders prided themselves on their origins as a colony founded on integrity and a strong willingness to risk their lives to fulfill its ideals.<sup>1</sup> It was the first colony to allow full religious freedom for all residents and its residents made freedom one of its key ideals. While others called the small colony “Rogue’s Island” for its independent mindedness and apparent stubbornness throughout the Revolutionary and Early Republic periods, Rhode Islanders viewed themselves as being the true standard bearers for protecting people’s independence and natural rights.<sup>2</sup> This, of course, was contrasted with the fact that many wealthy Rhode Islanders owned slaves and the Rhode Island merchants played a larger role in the Atlantic slave trade than any other colony. The Brown brothers would be raised within this society that encouraged members to work hard and fight for their rights while at the same time accepting slavery as something completely normal. Although the Browns had grown up loyal citizens to the British crown, they became swept up in the changing Parliamentary decisions of the 1760s and 1770s. The British navy’s attempt to enforce British mercantile policy encouraged the Brown’s to smuggle, ignore British edicts, evade royal naval officials, and misuse Flags of Truce to pursue their own business interests.<sup>3</sup> Like many pre-Revolution New England merchants, the Browns viewed British mercantile policy as one-sided and they would do what ever was necessary to fulfill their capitalistic and nationalistic goals.

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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 & Schuster, 2006) p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 30-31.

Rappleye focused on the conflicts and contradictions of the two younger brothers, Moses and John. These two brothers were each pioneers in the business world and worked feverishly to pursue their ideals, even if that brought them in conflict with one another. After an initial joint business venture in the slave trade turned tragic and did not return the expected profits, the two brothers took opposite positions on slavery and the slave trade. Always a man of faith, Moses soon became a devoted Quaker who championed the anti-slavery cause and tried over and over to extend the ideals of liberty and freedom. Unlike many fellow abolitionists of the time, Moses believed that "given the opportunity, blacks could assimilate into white society..." and "Moses saw blacks not just as pitiable objects for philanthropy but as equal to whites in every human capacity."<sup>4</sup> These ideas were quite radical for the time and helped to complicate the relationship he had with John. As committed as Moses was to anti-slavery causes, John became committed to maintaining the rights of slave owners and slave traders. John Brown was the complete opposite of his brother, and Rappleye described "Old Thunder" as a force to be reckoned with; boastful, cynical, obstinate, but also a powerful businessman, a fierce patriot, and a strong defender of individual rights, especially property.<sup>5</sup> Both brothers embraced the founding Rhode Island principles and the Revolutionary rhetoric that surrounded them, even though each interpreted these concepts in his own way. Both brothers also played a prominent role in shaping Rhode Island politically, economically, and socially in the early Republic, although sometimes in vastly different ways. Rappleye used the growing rifts between the two brothers to highlight the growing challenges and conflicts that were plaguing the new nation. For

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 340.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 3.

example, John Brown, always the more aggressive businessman and patriot, was much more willing to confront the British or new federal government. After the British navy tried to crack down on smuggling, John helped organize an attack on a British ship that resulted in the *Gaspee* being burned. This incident quickly brought more attention to Providence from the British crown and a bounty was placed on the ringleader's head. Although John was never tried or convicted, the incident highlights how far he was willing to go to support his cause.<sup>6</sup> If there was an anti-tax or anti-government regulation fight to be fought, John was normally in the thick of things. Following the Revolution, Moses and John continued to be on opposite sides of issues. Moses became even more devoted to anti-slavery causes and championed tougher laws against the slave trade, slavers, and slavery in Rhode Island and the nation. Although John was not really involved in the slave trade after the Revolutionary War, he still believed it was wrong to deny American merchants the same trade opportunities the European citizens had. As a result, John was often found writing anonymous letters, or speaking out against any attempts Moses made to pass new anti-slavery legislation. Ironically, after Moses helped form a new abolitionist group in Providence, which was key in helping to pass the federal Slave Trade Act of 1794, John Brown was the first Rhode Islander tried under the new law. The description of the conflict between the two brothers helped to show many of the arguments and complexities surrounding the issue of whether the United States should keep or ban slavery in the Early Republic era.

Rappleye also used the brothers' relationship to show that even though both brothers stood on opposite sides of many issues, they still supported each other. For

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 125.

example, during the Revolutionary War, John went on a covert action to try and get more supplies for the American military. While on his mission, his cover was blown and John was taken as a prisoner to Boston. Although a devote Quaker, and pacifist, Moses chose sides. Moses traveled to Boston, met with General Gage, and worked out a plan to get John released.<sup>7</sup> John, the committed rebel, would soon break the promises made to get his release. Moses would never give up on his brother though, and the more committed Moses became to his faith, the more committed apparently he was to trying to save his brother. Finally, both brothers also worked together on a cause that was very important to them. The biggest cause that united Moses and John was education. While Moses is better known for his campaign for ensuring a public education, both brothers were active in supporting new primary and secondary schools in Providence.<sup>8</sup> The continued commitment of the Browns to education, and land donation, resulted in Rhode Island College, now Brown University, being located in Providence rather than Newport, RI.

Overall, Rappleye provided a well-written and informative account about the Brown family and their immediate and lasting impacts on American society. Beyond secondary sources, Rappleye used numerous letters, wills, newspaper articles, and other primary sources to examine the conflicts between Moses and John. While most writers might prefer to focus only on issues of slavery or the American Revolution at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Rappleye blended both issues together well. By using the Brown brothers as his case study, he was also able to connect to many other themes since the brothers were so involved in faith, education, capitalism and industry, and politics. Rappleye was fair-minded and never overtly judgmental of one brother versus the other.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 151-162.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 84-85.

Rather, he explained the thought pattern and motivations of each in a clear and straightforward way. As a result, the reader gains insights into many different issues. Rappleye's work is also important because it reminds the reader of how important the slave trade was to the economy of New England. While most Americans consider it only a Southern problem, Rappleye's analysis reminds the reader of how entrenched the effects of the slave trade were in the north and why Northern politicians might not have chosen to fight to end slavery or the slave trade during the Constitutional Convention or in the years that followed.

Due to the enormous amount of themes in the book and the northern perspective on slavery, historians, history students, and popular audiences would all benefit from Rappleye's account of the Brown brothers. With that said, the book might not be entirely suitable for a high school history class. Teachers would benefit from reading this work, especially those who like to include New England history in their lessons to help make local connections for their students. A highly interested student who wanted to explore issues of the Revolution, the Constitution, industrialization, and slavery could enjoy reading the entire book. Most high school students would probably have some difficulty with the extent of Rhode Island history included, some of the repetition in the book, and occasional jumps forward and backward in chronology. There are some parts of the book that could be useful in a classroom. For example, in the chapter entitled *Anna*, Rappleye included a discussion of the arguments for and against slavery made by Samuel Sewall and John Saffin. The chapter *Equal Rights* also includes proslavery arguments, made by John Brown, and anti-slavery arguments, made by Moses' Brown. It would be useful in a classroom to analyze these arguments and debate the merits of both

arguments. Within the *Anna* chapter, Rappleye discussed the role of Quakers in the abolitionist movement.<sup>9</sup> This section could be used not only for its insights into the role of the Quakers in the abolition movement but also to highlight why they would take an active role in numerous other civil rights movements later in American history.

Comparisons between the Quakers and other, more mainstream, religious groups could be examined with this book. Later chapters, namely *Liberty 1775*, *Moses at War*, and *John at War*, examined Moses' transformation as a devote Quaker and presents examples of Moses' quest for emancipation during the war, and John's desire to fight in and profit from the war. By examining parts of these chapters, students could also compare and contrast the different ways Americans interpreted liberty and freedom, and how they participated in the American Revolution. Finally, the chapters *Liberty, 1782*, and *Equal Rights* also examined Rhode Islander's response to the Constitutional Convention. Given that RI was the last of the thirteen colonies to ratify the Constitution, these chapters could also be helpful to analyze why they held out so long with the argument of state's rights and the economic and political issues that finally convinced voters that they were better off in the new United States rather than an independent small nation surrounded by big neighbors.

Ultimately, the story of Moses Brown, the social reformer, and John Brown, the capitalist, highlighted the achievements and failures of one family in one small state, but also showed how significant local issues were during the larger national movements taking place at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rappleye explained their complex relationship as sibling rivalry, with neither one willing to back down on important issues

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 134-138.

despite their brother's different opinion. By telling the story of both brothers side by side, the reader gains a fuller picture of the complex issues dividing the nation through the eyes of these two very different brothers.