

Johann Knets  
Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School  
9/22/10

Book Review:  
Charles Rappleye's *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade,  
and the American Revolution*

The French politician Alexis de Tocqueville stated in his 1835 study, *De la democratie en Amerique*, that “Nowhere was this principle of liberty more totally applied than in New England.” Championing liberty, freedom, and often openly denouncing slavery, these are the traits commonly associated with colonial New England. However, in his study, de Tocqueville went on to raise questions concerning the inherent moral contradiction between New England’s self-proclaimed values and its close connection to the slave trade. It is this very contradiction that Charles Rappleye's *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution* deals with. The novel not only places the Brown family, more specifically the exploits of Moses and John, within the context of the events of the American Revolution, but also sheds light on how their relationship personified the inherent moral contradiction between the ideal of American liberty and the institution of slavery. Focusing on the rise, successes, and falling out between the two brothers, Rappleye does an effective job of detailing how their story captures the similar struggles that the founding generation of American went through.

By the mid-18th century the tiny colony of Rhode Island had taken the title of being the leader in the North American slave trade. In fact, Newport's ships carried more than 70 percent of America's slave trade. As commonly the case with colonial aristocracy, many of the state's leading citizens were slaveholders. Therefore, the

Browns entry into the slave trade came as a natural economic avenue at the time. Furthermore, their entry into the slave trade was encouraged by the British enforcement of existing trade taxes such as the Navigation Acts after the French and Indian War. In this sense, Rappleye does a very effective job of illustrating how the Brown's lives were shaped in large part by the events of the Revolutionary era.

After wading with some difficulty through the initial family history of the Brown family, Rappleye's focus centers on the exploits of Moses and John Brown. Each brother brought different strengths, skills, and personality traits, which together helped make the Brown family rise quickly in both in the political and economic scenes of Providence life. Of the two, John was the more willing to take risks as an aggressive entrepreneur. With tremendous enthusiasm, John he entered one business venture after another, always on the look out for a chance to make a profit. Moses, on the other hand, proved a capable business partner, often acting in a "behind the scenes" fashion, helping to keep the well-oiled Brown enterprises successful. The Browns initially held success in the candle making business and also had a very lucrative chocolate making factory as well, dominating the local market for both products. It was not long before the brothers were also participating in the "triangle trade system" or the Colombian Exchange, in which New England rum was made from Caribbean molasses, that was then sent to either European market or traded one for one in exchange for African slaves. Once these slaves were taken to their intended Caribbean port and sold, a new supply of molasses was purchased, which would then be distilled into rum, thus continuing the vicious cycle.

After setting up their initial character traits and path of development as a family, Rappleye covers the first experience of the Browns in the slave trade. In 1764, aboard

the Sally, the Browns encountered great difficulty in delivering their “precious” cargo to the Caribbean. Rappleye provides vivid details of the brutal middle passage and the suffering that took place. As stated from the ships log, there were entries such as “a slave boy died” and a woman slave hanged herself between decks.” In all, approximately 100 out of the 167 slaves perished from starvation, disease, and suicide. And it is at this moment, as Rappleye attests, that Moses and John had an eventual falling out. In 1773, Moses, shocked and appalled by the horrific events of their voyage, swore off the slave trade, freeing his own slaves as well, thus becoming an ardent abolitionist. Shortly after freeing his slaves, Moses stated “Whereas I am clearly convinced that buying and selling of men of what color soever as slaves is contrary to the Divine Mind manifest in the consciences fo all men however some may smother and neglect its reprovings...” (pg. 132) Brown indeed reached this epiphany moment, forever changing his life and his relationship with his brother John.

Although the opinion of Moses Brown seems to fall in line with the often misplaced opinion of New England as the unified center of the Abolitionist movement, his sudden change of heart was rather as shocking as it was complete. Rappleye captures this point through insightful analysis with the following passage:

"As obvious a moral affront as slavery appears today, there was no consensus on the evils inherent to slavery at the time Moses freed his slaves in 1773. Opposition to slavery was, in fact, espoused by a tiny minority, controversial even among the Quakers, and considered heretical by theologians and political thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic. In the West Indies in particular, but also in North and South America, slavery was the engine that drove the mercantile empires of Europe. The institution was as old as time -- finding explicit sanction in the Bible, and in the glory days of Greece and Rome -- and had flourished, in its modern form, for two hundred years. It appeared, in the eighteenth century, as universal and immutable as human nature."

He was, for his day and time, a genuine radical, and his views greatly complicated his relationship with his brother John, who had "built his fortune as a smuggler and a privateer" and, during the war with England, "managed to turn the war into a personal bonanza," through profiteering that made him "the richest man in Rhode Island." (pg. 134)

Through this passage, as well with additional retelling of the Brown's story, Rappleye effectively lays out the conflict between the social norms of the day and the moral contradictions associated with the slave trade.

While on the other hand, John was undeterred by the tragedy of the voyage, he would continue to finance slave ships. In fact, he would later continue to be one of America's strongest defenders of the slave trade. He became one of America's most fervent defenders of the trade. Slavery, he declared, was "right, just and lawful, and consequently practiced every day." Going a step further, he argued that America was doing Africans a huge favor by removing them from what he described as their "barbaric homeland". Diametrically opposed, the Brown brothers falling out over their positions on the slave trade provide an insightful window into the type of conflicts that affected many of the founding generation. Rappleye's story telling helps this sharp divide come through time and time again, while also portraying the loyalty the two brothers still continued to have for one another as family members. In doing so, Rappleye further emphasizes that the strain and difficulties which the Browns went through were all part of a very intricate and multilayered relationship. Yet again, their struggle and the "ups and downs" of their relationship exemplify the common conflicts that plagued American colonials.

From the surface the story of the Brown brothers appears to be the intriguing story of the rise and challenges of one of New England's most famous families, however, in

reality this novel provides a much stronger connection to the larger issues at play in colonial America. Through the eyes and actions of the Browns, Rappleye has interwoven the deep struggle that existed in the hearts of many colonials concerning the contradictions created by the institution of slavery. In many ways, their struggle over slavery mirrors that of America as a young nation, one that America failed to appropriately deal with, thus resulting in the eventuality of the Civil War. The various moral conflicts over the institution of slavery existed from the very founding of America, and the delicate line that was often walked around the issue, for the sake of holding the young nation together comes across as the major theme of Rappleye's novel. After all, as John Brown accurately wrote in 1789, "Many bloody wars...have ensued from less beginnings. A little fuel has sometimes kindled a great fire." (pg. 330) In this statement, John Brown correctly predicted the coming of a great conflict, the Civil War. In all, this example of the Brown's story is much more than the engaging rise to fame of their heralded family, but also a telling story that acts as a microcosm for America's own battles over slavery. Fitting their story within this larger context is the major success of the novel, one that translates well to the study of this time period in American history. Due to these reasons and more, this is a book that I would highly recommend to any history teacher. It has provided me with new facts, engaging stories, and an overall more enriched perspective on the slave trade and the American Revolution time period.