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The Rise and Fall of Radical Abolitionism

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John Stauffer of Harvard University has written a fascinating book. It is an epic tale of the making and breaking of a powerful mid-nineteenth-century interracial alliance. Between the 1830s and the 1850s, Gerrit Smith, Frederick Douglass, John Brown, and James McCune Smith forged an extraordinary friendship and together became radical political abolitionists bent on destroying slavery and purifying the nation from sin. They imagined a color-blind America in which equality and liberty, rather than racism and hate, defined the nation. They dreamed of a day when the “kingdom of God” would reign in the United States, as they believed it did in their own hearts. But their union was torn asunder by the same force that split the national Union: violence. Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry broke their fellowship and undermined their vision of a nation reborn.

While chronicling the rise and fall of this alliance, which Stauffer does with beautiful prose and exquisite analysis, he shows that New York merchant Gerrit Smith was the driving force uniting this “biracial quartet.” After the panic of 1837, both Gerrit Smith and Brown lost faith in America’s normative social structures. Gerrit Smith’s massive debts and Brown’s persistent inability to maintain employment led them to define themselves as outsiders from mainstream white culture. They rejected the material world and turned inward. Brown settled in North Elba, New York, a predominantly African American community, and slowly moved away from or-

thodox Puritan Calvinism, while Gerrit Smith conceived of an idea to commit over 100,000 acres of his property to poor blacks. This plan ultimately brought the four men together. Douglass and Brown settled on “Smith Land,” while McCune Smith, perhaps the most brilliant nineteenth-century black writer and physician, served as a trustee for the white Gerrit Smith.

>From the early 1840s to the late 1850s, their friendship thrived. Although rarely meeting in person, the four corresponded regularly with and through Smith. For Douglass and McCune Smith, Gerrit Smith was a white man unlike any other. His willingness to provide blacks with land, to listen to African Americans, and to seek out their opinions led Douglass and McCune Smith to identify Gerrit Smith as black. Stauffer also suggests that each one came to embrace a belief in “sacred self sovereignty”—that the kingdom of God was within them and could reside within every human being. This perfectionist faith, and a growing trust in the regenerative power of physical violence that was rooted in their glorified and simplistic conceptions of Native Americans, led them to endorse a millennialist vision of a new nation perfected through diversity and bloodshed, a nation that collapsed distinctions between the sacred and the profane, men and women, black and white, “civilized” and “uncivilized.”

Their beautiful friendship and collective vision, however, perished after Brown’s raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in October 1859. In the aftermath, Brown

was executed; Gerrit Smith went mad because he felt guilt-ridden for the death of Brown and his followers; and Douglass had to flee to Britain. Their faith in righteous violence, which had so powerfully linked them, now tore them apart. According to Stauffer, it would not be until the mid-twentieth century that such interracial friendships would again be forged.

The Black Hearts of Men is not a work that will fit neatly into contemporary literature on the abolitionist movement. Although Paul Goodman and Richard Newman also suggest that religious beliefs served as core ideological values leading reformers to become abolitionists, neither one examines the dynamic cosmologies of the abolitionists in depth. The millennial beliefs in “sacred self sovereignty” of Gerrit Smith, Brown, Douglass, and McCune Smith, and their faith in the regenerative power of violence, clearly differentiated them from the evangelically oriented Tappan brothers of New York and even the religiously liberal William Lloyd Garrison. Although many leading white abolitionists styled themselves as prophets of the “true” kingdom of God, few embraced this belief to the point of forming intimate social links with people of color and accepting martyrdom.

Stauffer’s work makes an interesting and valuable contribution to the study of race in antebellum America by examining the ways in which these abolitionists played with their racial affiliations and identities. Analyzing the daguerreotypes and carte-de-vistas of these four men, Stauffer shows how Brown and Douglass consciously depicted themselves in ways that blurred distinctions between “white” and “black.” In their postures and demeanors, the daguerreotyped Douglass and Brown appear similar. Both look directly at the camera; both look intent, powerful, and even angry; and both look dark skinned. Gerrit Smith and McCune Smith displayed themselves quite differently from Brown and Douglass. Their skin colors are lighter and they stare beyond the camera with a visionary gaze. But the fate of this interracial alliance also demonstrates just how entrenched concepts of racial difference were for many antebellum whites. As much as Gerrit Smith sought to portray himself as a “colored man,” he was still treated as “white” and Douglass was still regarded as “black.” This was nowhere more apparent than after Brown’s raid when Virginia’s Governor Henry Wise refused to pursue Gerrit Smith, but called for a ferocious manhunt for Douglass. Blurring racial lines, it appears, had serious limits.

One drawback in *The Black Hearts of Men* is Stauffer’s penchant for overstatement and exaggeration. On

the very first page, he asserts that the bonds of this alliance “were unprecedented in their own time and were probably not duplicated until well into the twentieth century” (p. 1). But one does not need to jump from the 1860s to the 1960s to find examples of interracial political alliances of friendship and compassion: examples abounded during radical Reconstruction. New England’s Laura Towne ventured south to teach newly emancipated African Americans in 1862 and remained there for the next forty years. She taught hundreds of people of color, spent innumerable hours talking political strategy with Robert Smalls, the hero of the *Planter*, and identified herself as part of the black community. In West Virginia, another missionary, Sarah Jane Foster, not only fell in love with a freedman named John Brown, but even hoped that local whites would think her “part colored” so that they would not disturb her school.

Stauffer’s commitment to the tragic nature of this tale pushes him to simplify Gerrit Smith’s career after Harpers Ferry. “[S]omething died in Gerrit Smith” after the raid (p. 238), Stauffer maintains, and this radical abolitionist took a conservative turn. He repudiated the Bible, regarded people of color as inherently inferior to whites; re-accepted colonization; and even endorsed a quick reconciliation with southern whites after the Civil War. In Stauffer’s rendering, Smith is an ideal tragic hero. Like the biblical Moses, he was able to ascend to unprecedented heights of glory, but ultimately unable to reach the Promised Land. However, historical figures are rarely, if ever, this simple. In fact, some of Smith’s comments after the Civil War suggest that he maintained hopes for transforming the entire nation. Only weeks after the war’s end, when many Northerners felt intense anger toward the Confederacy for Lincoln’s assassination, Gerrit Smith warned that condemnations of the Confederacy may blind Northerners to their own evil. “However important it may be for the North to be impressing herself with the great wickedness of those who are pre-eminently responsible for this war and for the starving and murdering of tens of thousands of prisoners,” he preached, “her more important duty, nevertheless, is to repent of her own sins.” Gerrit Smith knew well—even after the war—that slavery and racism were not merely southern sins; they were national ones.

Most troubling, however, is the connection Stauffer makes between the violence endorsed by these abolitionists and then used by Brown and the federal government during the Civil War with that of white supremacists after the conflict. “The century of horrible racism and racial oppression following the war,” Stauffer asserts,

“stemmed in part from the savage violence that brought slavery to an end” (p. 207). But Brown was not an antebellum precursor of Ben “Pitchfork” Tillman. The men who raided Harpers Ferry were not proto-Klansmen. American slavery was an institution sustained and nourished by violence. By 1859, the whip and the slave patrol had become chief emblems of the “peculiar institution,” a system that had state and federal backing. So when Brown employed force, he was merely responding in kind. In the postwar years, when white supremacists shot up black political meetings or lynched African Americans for endeavoring to learn to read and write, they were not responding in kind. They were bullying people who had little legal or military defense. Harpers Ferry, in short, had little in common with the Hamburg Massacre of 1876. The moral distinction is crucial and should not be neglected in favor of rhetorical flights of fancy.

There are plenty of other claims in *The Black Hearts*

of Men that will be difficult for historians to swallow, including Stauffer’s assertion that John Brown and Frederick Douglass embraced “feminism” and that Gerrit Smith’s land grants to people of color can be viewed as “an important precedent in the debates about land distribution during the Civil War and Reconstruction” (p. 144). But criticisms aside, Stauffer has written a highly engaging tale in which four nineteenth-century men strove to create a beautiful world. Perhaps their finest achievement was to dare. Not only did they dream of a pluralistic, egalitarian nation, but they set out to make it happen. Either by granting land to thousands, by believing that whites could shed their whiteness, by speaking at countless venues to hostile crowds, or by leading an armed resistance to tyranny, these four men enacted their desire for racial liberation and equality. Historians have John Stauffer to thank for resurrecting this tale, and gratitude will be shown him, I am sure, with countless books and articles following or challenging his lead.

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