H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Henry Box Brown. *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. xxxiii + 73 pp. $21.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-514853-4; $12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-514854-1.

Reviewed by Andre M. Fleche (Corcoran Department of History, University of Virginia)
Published on H-CivWar (August, 2003)

Historians have long debated the role abolitionists played in precipitating the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln himself may have started the controversy when he allegedly quipped, upon meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe, "So here is the little lady that started this big war." Lincoln's quote is debatable, possibly apocryphal, and also misleading, as Richard Newman reminds us with his recent restoration and republication of Henry "Box" Brown's once-popular narrative of his life as a slave in the South and subsequent daring escape to freedom in the North.

The specifics of Henry "Box" Brown's escape from bondage are vaguely familiar to many students of American history. On March 29, 1849, Brown, measuring five feet, eight inches, and two hundred pounds, nailed himself inside a cramped wooden packing crate addressed to a prominent Philadelphia abolitionist. Brown spent twenty-seven hours in the U.S. mail before arriving at the office of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Committee where he emerged from his container a free man.

Despite garnering footnotes in numerous high school textbooks and forming the subject of a recent Toyota commercial, Brown's narrative has, until now, remained largely inaccessible to the general reader and the academic alike. Newman points out in his introduction that, although the book went through three editions in the mid-nineteenth century, researchers rarely find original copies even in archival libraries. Only twelve American universities hold copies of the 1851 British edition. It is this edition, probably revised by Brown after his relocation to England following passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, that Newman has restored and republished.

Brown's dramatic escape forms only the end of the story, while the bulk of his fifty-eight page narrative describes his life as a slave in Richmond, Virginia. Brown grew up on a large Louisa County plantation where he received comparatively good treatment before he saw his family broken up after the death of his first owner. Inherited by the dead patriarch's son, Brown went to work in his new master's Richmond tobacco factory where, like many urban slaves, he proved able to achieve a remarkable degree of independence. Brown received an allowance and lived in a rented apartment with his wife and children. His wife's owner, however, extorted money from Brown to continue the arrangement and, in an act of final betrayal, sold her and their two children to a trader bound for North Carolina. Left without family or possessions, Brown resolved to flee from bondage.

Brown's narrative provides a powerful indictment of slavery and the Southern social system that grew up around it. Feeling "impelled by the voice of my own conscience … to add yet one other testimony of, and protest against, the foul blot on the state of morals, of religion, and of cultivation in the American republic," Brown leveled charges against the peculiar institution familiar to any student of abolitionist literature (p. 3). Slavery degraded servant and owner alike, allowed masters an appalling degree of sexual license, and proved incongruent with republican ideals outlined in the Declaration of Independence.

Religion provided Brown his most important source of both inspiration and condemnation. He constantly exposed the hypocrisy of Southern piety to his religious Northern readers. "It is a lamentable fact that some ministers of religion are contaminated with the foulness of slavery. Those men, in the southern states, who ascend the pulpit to proclaim the world's jubilee, are themselves, in fearful numbers, the holders of slaves!" (p. 6). While Christianity imparted few redeeming qualities to the slaveholder, it succeeded in holding the slave in abject submission. "The religion of the slave-holder is everywhere a system of mere delusion, got up expressly for the purpose of deceiving the poor slaves" (p. 39).

Still, Brown's personal faith in God guided him in his quest for freedom. He first conceived his ingenious plan of escape while praying. "I felt convinced that I should be acting in accordance with the will of God, if I could snap in sunder those bonds by which I was held body and

soul as the property of a fellow man" (p. 56). Indeed, in stressing the moral imperatives for ending slavery Brown rarely lost sight of the fact that his audience consisted largely of religious northern abolitionists. Brown's narrative served not only as a personal attack on the slave system, but also as an immensely popular tract produced for consumption by abolitionist audiences eager for tales told by authentic southern slaves.

The foreword by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and the introduction by Richard Newman do an invaluable service by placing Brown's text in this wider context of slave narratives and antislavery lecture circuit rallies. Brown's autobiography joined those of Frederick Douglass (1845), William Wells Brown (1848), and Sojourner Truth (1850), along with those of countless lesser-known fugitives from slavery, on the burgeoning abolitionist book market. This fact serves as a reminder that African Americans themselves played a crucial role in developing the mainstream abolitionist attack on southern slavery. Indeed, Brown's themes and styles provide a strikingly obvious and undeniable influence for Harriet Beecher Stowe's later and more famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In a section that could easily be mistaken for a passage from Stowe's novel, Brown appeals directly to Northern abolitionist concerns for family and domesticity. He asked, "Mothers of the North! As you gaze upon the fair forms of your idolized little ones, just pause for a moment; how would you feel if you knew that at any time the will of a tyrant–who neither could nor would sympathize with your domestic feelings–might separate them for ever from your embrace?" (pp. 16-17).

The similarities between Brown's account and more famous works of abolitionist literature stem from the fact that most slave narratives, Brown's included, represented the collaboration between black and white anti-slavery activists. Brown employed abolitionist Charles Stearns to ghostwrite the first edition of his story, entitled *Narrative of Henry Box Brown Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. Remarks upon the Remedy for Slavery. By Charles Stearns*. As the title may indicate, Stearns tended to indulge in inflated rhetoric and moralization. According to Newman, Brown edited the manuscript and pared down much of the flowery prose for the publication of the second edition.

While it is undoubtedly true that the resulting "Manchester edition is obviously closer to Brown's own telling of his own story," Newman's assertion that "the real difference is that this version is told in Brown's own voice" is less convincing (pp. xii, xiii). The facts surrounding the publication of the second edition are unclear and Newman fails to find hard evidence of Brown's motives for the changes. Newman calls the Stearns edition "highly flawed," but does not afford the reader the opportunity to decide for him or herself (p. xii). Inclusion of some, or all, of the original text would have served to enhance the value of this rich primary source. Indeed, the brief introductory essay leaves the reader wanting to know more about Brown's life and the history of the edition Newman chose to restore. How did Brown go about securing a second publisher? What role did the publisher play in shaping the final narrative? What were their motives for republishing the work, and what can that tell us about the British abolitionist movement?

Still, the information provided in the introduction does a good job of highlighting the complexities that surround Brown and his narrative. As Newman points out, Brown's text shared many characteristics with other slave narratives. "It follows the usual outline of events. It serves as an anti-slavery tract" (p. xix). Just as importantly, "it is a way to make money. Brown's narrative advertises his abolitionist lectures and is a memento to be sold afterwards" (p. xix). These last two points go the furthest in illustrating the style of both mid-century abolitionism and the controversies that accompanied it. Newman describes how Brown "became an instant celebrity, a status he discovered he liked and learned to exploit. He went on the abolitionist lecture circuit, singing his songs and telling his story" (p. xv). Brown adapted a minstrel tune to accompany a freedom song he wrote and regularly performed, and charged interested crowds admission to view a panorama he commissioned depicting the evils of slavery. Many pious devotees of abolitionism, it seems, enjoyed activism delivered in a theatrical style more often associated with racist minstrel shows and curiosity museums. Newman concludes that "success as a speaker and singer performing on the anti-slavery circuit not only agreed with Brown, it encouraged his abilities as an entrepreneur" (p. xxvi).

Not all of his contemporaries, however, approved of a style that combined the serious business of abolitionism with dramatic showmanship and an ample profit margin. Frederick Douglass considered Brown an opportunist and condemned him for revealing his mode of escape. Brown's long-time friend and business partner, J. C. A. Smith, accused Brown of philandering and licentiousness after a dispute over money. Controversy surrounded the elusive Brown long after his dramatic escape.

Like any great primary source, Brown's story raises

more questions than it answers. An interested researcher could make valuable contributions to the fields of American history, literature, and cultural studies by following up one of the many themes that run through Brown's work. Slave life, the role of religion in critiquing the slave system, the popular culture surrounding the abolitionist movement and its celebrities, and the influence of the slave narrative in shaping the canonical works of nineteenth-century literature are among the topics upon which Brown's narrative sheds new light. Richard Newman has done an invaluable service in restoring this text and reminding us that popular abolitionism did not begin and end with the work of Harriet Beecher-Stowe.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Andre M. Fleche. Review of Brown, Henry Box, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. August, 2003.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8082

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.