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TITLE INFORMATION

GRAPPLING WITH LEGACY

Rhode Island's Brown Family and the American Philanthropic Impulse

Sylvia Brown

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BOOK REVIEW

A history of a prominent American family's entrepreneurial rise and the way that it shaped modern philanthropy.

In 1638, Englishman Chad Browne set sail for Boston in search of religious freedom, and he later converted to a Baptist denomination, impressed with its optimistic spirit and commitment to egalitarianism. In 1722, his descendant, James, who was fascinated by all things maritime, established the family trading business that set the stage for its future wealth. Obadiah Brown changed the spelling of the family name, and his son, Nicholas, oversaw a tremendous expansion of the family business, coterminous with the transformation of Providence, Rhode Island, into a major commercial port. However, Nicholas Brown II is the real focal point of the book, not only because his 40-year partnership with Thomas Ives was so lucrative, but also because he greatly changed the nature of the family's charitable activity. Previously, the Browns' generosity was a function of self-interested desire for social station and influence, but Nicholas II took seriously the notion of philanthropy as social responsibility. In 1804, he made a significant contribution to the College of Rhode Island when it was in dire straits, and as a result, it was renamed after the family. In the 1820s, Nicholas II made Brown University the principal object of his attention, and worked hard to make it an instrument of morality and civic-mindedness. By approaching his role as benefactor as a more participatory one, with a view toward long-term results, he helped to create the model for modern philanthropic strategy.

Brown (*The Post-Pregnancy Handbook*, 2003) took more than a decade to research and write this book, and her mastery of her own family's history is undeniable. It has the scrupulousness and detail of a journalistic effort, meticulously weaving a large amount of information into a coherent tapestry. One could quibble that, at times, she includes too much detail, particularly about the family's finances. Brown candidly declares up front that one reason that she wrote the book was to address the demonization of family members who participated in the slave trade. She notes that the Browns were conflicted; Nicholas II, for example, inherited his opposition to slavery from his uncle Moses ("one of the earliest and most fervent advocates of abolition"), but he also expressed worry about the social consequences of its elimination. The author never excuses her family's participation in the slave trade, but she does attempt to situate their moral transgression in the full historical context in which it occurred, instead of simplistically applying "the precepts of the present to the mores of the past." Later, the author shows that the Brown family's transformation of its attitude toward philanthropy mirrored what was happening in the country at large. During a discussion of Jacksonian America, she astutely juxtaposes the nation's principled commitment to egalitarianism with the burgeoning inequality produced by urbanization and industrialization. Throughout, Brown's prose is clear and spirited, and the story unfolds briskly and dramatically.

An often riveting history of a family that left an indelible impact on the nation.

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