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A REDISCOVERED GEM

The United States Governed by Six Hundred Thousand Despots: A True Story of Slavery, by John Swanson Jacobs, edited by Jonathan D.S. Schroeder. University of Chicago Press, 328 pages, \$115 (cloth), \$20 (paper)



John Swanson Jacobs, portrait by Joseph Whiting Stock.

THE UNITED STATES GOVERNED BY SIX *Hundred Thousand Despots* was written by John Swanson Jacobs, born in Edenton, North Carolina sometime between 1815 and 1817. In 1838 he escaped slavery from his fifth master, Congressman Samuel Sawyer, during a sojourn to New York. Thereafter, Jacobs led an eventful life as a sailor, miner, public lecturer, restaurateur, prominent abolitionist, and bookseller. While in Australia on a mining enterprise, he wrote his narrative that was published in the *Empire*, a Sydney newspaper.

The rediscovery and republication of *Six Hundred Thousand Despots* by Jonathan Schroeder, a lecturer in literature at the Rhode Island School of Design, is a signal scholarly achievement. Given that millions toiled in American slavery until its final, constitutional abolition in 1865, the list of 100 or so surviving works by freed or escaped slaves is regrettably short. Thus, the addition of this work, running 74 pages and containing much material worth pondering, is a rare and exciting event. Adding to the importance of this

text's discovery is that its author lectured with Frederick Douglass, worked with William Lloyd Garrison, and knew British abolitionist George Thompson. His good qualities—intelligence, character, and cultivation—were praised by all who ever commented about him. Schroeder complements the book with an interpretive essay, a short history of Jacobs's life, and two appendices: one that includes all other currently known writings by Jacobs and another containing contemporaneous writings that mention Jacobs.

THE 600,000 DESPOTS TO WHOM JACOBS refers are the slaveholders who ruled over Americans, an assertion that connects to specific aspects of Jacobs's life. First, after escaping slavery Jacobs was in contact with the abolitionists who established the Liberty Party in 1840. Their argument that slavery had fundamentally transformed the United States from republicanism into oligarchy was picked up by the Free Soil Party and, later, by the Republican Party.

Jacobs's emphasis is not on the slaveholders' iron grip over the South, however, nor their threat to republican institutions in the nation. He focuses on what he deems to be the source of the despots' power, their domination of the American conscience, in flat contradiction with Christian principle. Though virtually passed over by Schroeder, Christian faith is the central theme in Jacobs's treatment of slavery. To Jacobs, slavery is unnatural and worse, ungodly. It corrupted the religious theory and practice of free Christians, North and South, led the enslaved to sin, and destroyed the basis of family.

Jacobs uses himself as an example, recounting how as a child he had obeyed his mistress despite his enslaved father's contrary command, violating the Biblical command to honor thy father. But had he obeyed his father rather than his mistress, he could expect punishment. These are conditions that test one's faith, when the sharp choice between suffering or sin is clearly binary. Persecution probably claimed the life of Jacobs's father who



died young, filled with impotent rage against slavery that denied him paternal rights over his children.

In the persecuting fire that was slavery it was Jacobs's grandmother who taught him "love and forgiveness," how "to love those who loved not me, and forgive those that ill-treated me." To her practical demonstration of Christian piety, a Reverend Carnes added instruction in the articles of the faith. Together, these experiences explain why the primary target of Jacobs's attacks is the faithlessness of Americans and their voluntary thralldom under the rule of 600,000 diabolical despots.

CARNES CAME FROM THE NORTH AND took over St. Paul's Church in Edenton. Other Southern clergy had merely taught slaves to obey, but Carnes taught them the Bible. Jacobs learned from him that Christians are commanded to love their brethren. But when he saw that this teaching bothered the slaveholders in the church community and then led a white widow to free her slaves in her will, causing Carnes's banishment, he knew that Christianity and slavery must be incompatible.

The slaveholders, by their actions, taught Jacobs Christianity's true relationship to slavery. Therefore, Jacobs understood, as the great Massachusetts educator turned Congressman Horace Mann had argued in a long anti-slavery speech in 1848, "that ignorance is the only hope of slavery, that to enlighten the slaves would be to liberate them." In a sense, the enlightenment Jacobs attained with Carnes's help was when he became a free man, years before his actual escape from slavery. Jacobs knew he was made in the image of God like all the rest of humanity and was not made for slavery. Though still bound physically, he had found freedom in Christ.

Ultimately, what stood in the way of abolition was the citizenry's infidelity, the recreancy of a country professing Christianity but practicing paganism. While sending missionaries of their faith abroad to people of foreign lands, Americans were preventing instruction in the faith among slaves in their own land. The law's imbecility and even its aid to slavery was epiphenomenal to this fundamental problem. The end of slavery by law would follow America's final reckoning with its own hypocrisy.

That day of reckoning, Jacobs was sure, would come. In passages eerily anticipating

Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, Jacobs confidently predicts that "the promise of God...assure[s] me that the oppressor's rod shall be broken.... [B]ut woe to that country where the sun of liberty has to rise up out of a sea of blood." From the beginning to the end of *The United States Governed by Six Hundred Thousand Despots*, Jacobs exposes and attacks the religious hypocrisy of all Americans and predicts that they will all pay dearly for their offense against divine law. Like a dying star collapsing upon itself, the country would destroy itself in a great catastrophe when its hypocrisy was no longer sustainable, but that necessary catastrophe would purge the nation of its guilt for its great sin and then finally bring about abolition and equality before the law.

READERS SHOULD KNOW THAT THE Jacobs they meet in Jacobs's writings, and in contemporaneous writings about him, differs markedly from the Jacobs who emerges from Schroeder's writings. For Schroeder, Jacobs is "a revolutionary Black sailor" and "a prophet of justice." A man with "apocalyptic intelligence," his work "constitutes a spectacular performance of autobiographical freedom." When in debate with a cleric, Jacobs "dismantles the clergyman's argument." In another debate, Jacobs is "[c]hess-like as always," as he "positioned the clergyman to make a losing move." His presence is spell-binding and moves men as the divine presence does, which Schroeder imagines in the moment when Jacobs first introduces himself to the newspapermen at the offices of the *Empire*. Schroeder writes that when Jacobs appeared they immediately knew him "as a man not to be taken lightly.... [H]e was artfully training them to dignify his Blackness." Schroeder even claims to know how Jacobs "moved, expressed emotion, modulated his voice" in that moment, even though the only record of this encounter, a brief note left by the editor of the *Empire*, offers absolutely no evidence to support these claims.

In other words, Schroeder attributes superhuman qualities to Jacobs and, in deifying him, reshapes Jacobs into the man of Schroeder's fond imagination, an oracle and a founding father of today's multicultural Left. For example, Schroeder claims that "Jacobs's experience in the transpacific world dramatically transformed and deepened his abolitionist views, allowing him to draw connections

between America and the world and imagine transnational solidarity with migrant labor forces from what we would today call the Global South." How do we know this? Because around the time that Jacobs submitted his manuscript to the *Sydney Empire*, the governor of Victoria "subscribed to a theory of 'oriental despotism' that labeled the Chinese as heathens averse to Christian morality and was used to justify anti-Chinese legislation." On this basis we are expected to believe that Jacobs held an "anticolonial point of view," and that to Jacobs, "the real despot was [Governor Charles] Hotham, not the Chinese." Attentive readers will notice again and again that Schroeder advances claims and interpretations with little or no support from the primary texts, and often supplies analyses that are postmodern word salads.

SCHROEDER'S JACOBS IS NOT AMERICAN in character, nor a man of Western civilization, but rather "fashions himself as an alternative to Enlightenment conceptions of the human and humanity." Along with "pirates, slaves, servants, and outcasts," Jacobs "devised and disseminated radical ideas about freedom and equality." Although we are not told where we might locate these imagined *Pirate Federalist Papers*, we are assured that their principles, and not those of the founding, supplied the critical standard with which Jacobs condemns America from the vantage point of "a stranger outside the state." In other words, when Jacobs fled America, he was not reluctantly leaving his home for fear of losing his freedom due to the harsh new Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, as Jacobs attests. Rather, Schroeder's Jacobs was declaring his independence from America on the basis of new and better principles.

Nevertheless, readers will handsomely reward themselves by studying the real John Jacobs, the man as he understood himself. To Jonathan Schroeder's credit, his extensive research into the facts of Jacobs's life allows readers to draw their own conclusions from the primary texts and detailed notes. There is no need to exaggerate his character to recognize a very good man, a man whose personal account is well worth our further study, and a man we are glad to meet as a fellow American.

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