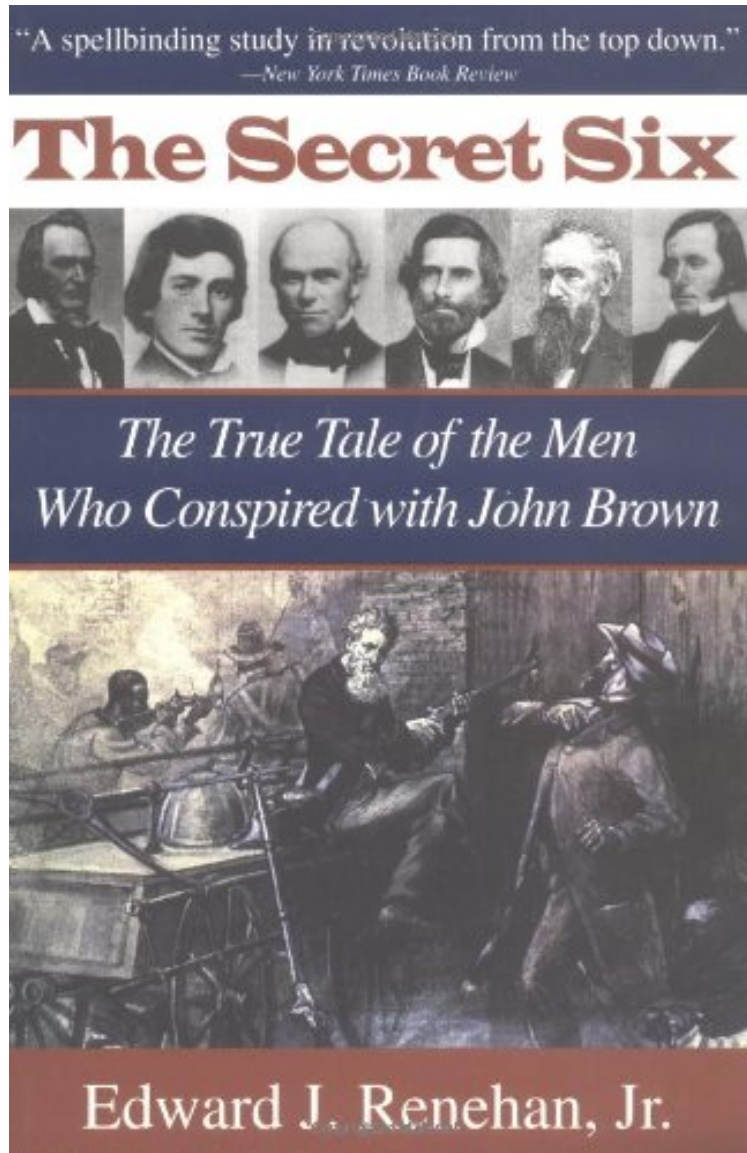


Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown

Edward J. Jr. Renehan

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Edward J. Jr. Renehan : Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown:

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. "Six Peters" *By Kerry Walters John Brown remains an elusive

figure even today, nearly 150 years and who knows how many books after his execution. But our continuing fascination for the Brown--was he a saint? a madman? a traitor? a hero?--tends to overlook the fact that his activities, both in bleeding Kansas and Harpers Ferry, were financed and supported by many aristocratic and wealthy New England abolitionists. Edward Renehan's genuinely fascinating book offers us the first in-depth look at the leading six of them: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a pastor who became a colonel of black troops in the Civil War; Theodore Parker, minister and philosopher; Franklin Sanborn, educator; Samuel Howe, physician; and Gerrit Smith of New York and George Luther Stearns of Boston, wealthy businessmen. For me, the overriding impression from Renehan's narrative is that the involvement of the "secret six" with Brown was not unlike a Gilbert Sullivan comedy. The six raised money for weapons that were frequently low quality; they self-importantly sprinkled letters to one another with codewords: "shepherds" for soldiers; "furniture" for guns, "Hawkins" for Brown; they insisted on not knowing details about Brown's plans to protect themselves, yet got petulant when they felt they were kept out of the loop; when Brown was captured, all but one of them (Higginson) panicked mightily (Higginson, to his never-ending mortification, seems never to have been recognized as a conspirator by the authorities); and by the time Brown was hanged on 2 December 1859, Howe and Stearns had fled the country, Parker was dying of consumption in Italy, Sanborn couldn't make up his mind whether or not he ought to flee, Smith was in an insane asylum, and Higginson was planning a half-cocked (and never pulled off) plan to rescue Brown's still imprisoned companions in the crazy raid on Harpers Ferry. All this is absurd and even silly. But things take on a much more ominous tone when Renehan paints a portrait of Brown as a religious fanatic who seems indifferent to life in Kansas (the Pottawatomie massacre is just the most famous example); who believed that his raid on Harpers Ferry was approved by God and hence infallible; whose military planning included the bizarre insistence that low ground was more defensible than high; and who apparently felt no compunction about adding deception and common theft to murder in the pursuit of his goal to spark a slave insurrection. The fascinating subtext of Renehan's book, then, is a question: how is it that well-educated, wealthy, upper-class men could've so fallen under the sway of a man like Brown that they were willing to risk treason to finance his insurrection (notwithstanding that after the revolt failed they lost their nerves)? Part of the answer lies in the secret six's hatred of slavery and their despair over a legal end to it. But part of the reason must also have been Brown's charisma. Mad as he probably was--as even Higginson years later said he was--his magnetism was overpowering. A valuable addition to our understanding of the pre-civil war in Kansas as well as the debacle at Harpers Ferry. Highly recommended.

* The title Higginson gave himself and his five fellow backers of Brown who, Higginson believed, all betrayed Brown after his capture by trying to deny their complicity. The reference, of course, is to Peter's denial of Jesus. 5 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Rich Radicalism 1850s style By James W. Durney Where is that very fine line between supporting a cause and breaking the law? This is a history of the six men who provided money to John Brown and may have crossed that line in supporting him. Slavery was the cause of a major division and source of disruption in nineteenth century American life. The Northern states managed to abolish slavery with minimal problems. At the same time, slavery in the Southern states became immensely profitable and the foundation on which a society rested. Slavery colored every national debate, becoming the sticking point for westward expansion and the source of radicalism in both the North and South. Agreeing with their position and knowing history makes it easier for us to be sympathetic toward these men. This masks the fact that their money supported actions that caused a number of deaths. Who are "The Secret Six" and why would they support someone like John Brown? The answer to that question is the subject of this book. Edward Renehan shows that there is no easy answer to this question, providing a look at six complex men. Individually and collectively, they decided that the United States was evil and their cause placed them above the law. Two placed themselves "in harms way" during resistance to the Fugitive slave law or in Kansas. The balance stayed home and allowed their money to do their fighting. Into their lives came John Brown, failed businessman, possible criminal, zealot and ready to "fight slavery". Six wealthy men wanting to strike a blow for freedom and one zealot with money problems was the almost perfect match. The book contains a very good portrait of all the main characters. An overbearing possibly abusive husband, a hypochondriac, a number of well meaning people that were committed to revolt and a cold-blooded killer is the cast. They do not make for a likeable or heroic group and the author details their good and bad points. Along the way, we get a nice overview of bleeding Kansas as seen in Boston and as Brown contributed to it. This build up, allows the reader to understand how the Secret Six were able to accept Brown's ideas and assume his plans would work. When Harpers Ferry failed, the Secret Six realized that many might consider them to be as guilty as Brown. This section shows them at their worst as they scrambled to get clear of the mess they had helped create. The opening chapter is one of the best introductions I have ever read, setting the tone of the book, introducing the cast and providing closure. The writing style is very good and easy to read. The book is informative and complete, providing a look into a world of privileged radicals in the years leading up to the Civil War. This is a balanced history, free of condemnation or adulation leaving judgment up to the reader. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A must read for every War between the states buff By Leon Lane Excellent!! Great writing, great research and great documentation. Another lesson that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Most Americans know that John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia - a raid he believed would ignite a bloody slave revolution - was one of the events that sparked the Civil War. But very few know the story of how Brown was covertly aided by a circle of prosperous and privileged Northeasterners who supplied him with money and weapons, and, before the raid, even hid him in their homes while authorities sought Brown on a murder charge. These men called themselves the Secret Six. The Secret Six included Thomas Wentworth Higginson, minister, author, and editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*; Samuel Howe, world-famous physician; Theodore Parker, the Unitarian minister whose rhetoric helped shape Lincoln's Gettysburg Address; Franklin Sanborn, an educator and close friend of Emerson and Thoreau; and the immensely wealthy Gerrit Smith and George Luther Stearns. The existence of the Six has been known to scholars, but there has never been a book devoted to them. Now, drawing on archives from Boston to Kansas, Edward J. Renehan, Jr., has created a vivid portrait of this unlikely cabal, showing how six pillars of the establishment came to believe that armed conflict was necessary in order to purge the United States of a government-sanctioned evil, slavery. The messianic zealot Brown - also portrayed - streaked across their path like a meteor. Renehan traces how the Six became involved with Brown, and how their lives were forever changed by the events at Harpers Ferry and the war they helped to start.

From Publishers Weekly Renehan provides a significant addition to the literature on abolitionism in this study of six prominent Northerners who supported and financed John Brown's 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, Va. (now W.Va.). Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Theodore Parker, Samuel Howe, Gerrit Smith, Franklin Sanborn and George Luther Stearns were all men of learning, wealth and status who seemed to inhabit a different world than the rough-hewn Brown. They shared with him, however, an idealistic hatred of slavery and the growing belief that the evil could be purged only by direct action. In the aftermath of the mission's failure, they successfully distanced themselves from the venture, at least publicly. Nevertheless, Renehan establishes the abolitionist movement's essential unity and how Brown and his advocates, willing to use violence, helped push the country toward civil war. Photos. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal When John Brown was captured after his raid on Harper's Ferry, letters were found from prominent citizens who had been his financial backers since his days in Kansas. The Secret Six included Thomas W. Higgins, publisher of *Atlantic Monthly*, and other well-to-do men of Boston and New York, all of whom wished anonymity. Their names were published shortly after the raid, prompting two of the six to run to Canada and one to go insane; all concerned thereafter distanced themselves from Brown for fear of being convicted of treason. Renehan (*John Burroughs: An American Naturalist*, LJ 11/15/92) describes how these pillars of society, with their romantic notions about war, decided after the Fugitive Slave Act and other proslavery decisions that armed conflict was necessary to end slavery. Brown was a violent man with a history of fraud and failed ventures, but he was also a devout abolitionist and a persuasive speaker. His raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 failed, but it did feed the flames that erupted into civil war. This well-researched book about that turbulent time is strongly recommended for serious collections. Robert C. Moore, DuPont Merck Pharmaceutical Co. Information Svcs., N. Billerica, Mass. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc. "In vivid prose, *The Secret Six* unravels the mysteries of the six prominent abolitionists who supported John Brown but abandoned him to his fate after the ill-starred raid at Harpers Ferry. Edward Renehan has made an important contribution to our understanding of the Civil War and its causes." James M. McPherson, author of *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* "With their own words and private correspondence, this remarkable book reveals more secrets of the Secret Six than John Brown ever knew." C. Vann Woodward, author of *The Burden of Southern History* and *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* "Renehan admirably works himself into the inner circle of these would-be conspirators for good." Garry Wills, author of *Lincoln at Gettysburg* and *Certain Trumpets* "Ed Renehan's very impressive historical research makes his Secret Six come alive and will enrich any reader's understanding of the era leading up to the Civil War." James Fallows, author of *Looking at the Sun*