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PRESTON SMITH BROOKS: THE MAN AND HIS IMAGE

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Recalling a vivid memory of 1856, a distinguished Northern woman reminisced, "At the hotel I had remarked a handsome man, evidently a Southerner, with what appeared to me an evil expression of countenance. This was Brooks of South Carolina."¹ These revealing words of Julia Ward Howe graphically exemplify what was to become of the historical image of Congressman Preston Smith Brooks, the perpetrator of the notorious assault upon Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. For Howe, mere abhorrence of Brooks's precipitous deed, without any substantive knowledge of the man or his principles, was sufficient reason to see in his image "an evil expression of countenance." Regretably, historians have often been guilty of the same indiscretion.

Indeed, few men of American history have been mentioned so prominently yet investigated so carelessly as Preston Smith Brooks. While the life of his antagonist, Charles Sumner, has been thoroughly scrutinized by several able biographers, Brooks has remained in the public mind an obscure and enigmatic individual.² The image of Brooks which has generally endured in both popular and scholarly accounts is predominantly the identical one which appeared in Northern orations and publications at the time of his encounter with Sumner. The misused South Carolinian emerges continually in historical literature as "Bully Brooks," a "hotheaded," "hot-tempered" representative of Southern so-

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¹ Julia Ward Howe, *Reminiscences, 1819-1899* (Boston and New York, 1899), p. 179.

² An excellent example of the negligence accorded to Brooks is the frequency of references to him as the "nephew" of Andrew Butler. A survey of thirteen popular history textbooks at the college level revealed that only two correctly identified Brooks as the "cousin" of Butler. The error is even repeated in such respected reference works as: Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1958), II, 88; Richard B. Morris, ed., *Encyclopedia of American History* (New York and Evanston, 1961), p. 221; *Webster's Biographical Dictionary* (Springfield, 1972), p. 198. In reality, Brooks's father Whitfield Brooks, and Andrew Butler were first cousins. See: Theodore D. Jervey, "The Butlers of South Carolina," this *Magazine*, IV (October, 1903), 296-311.

her commerce and generally refurbish her economic life during the decade were so rudely aborted by the long-term impact of the Panic of 1837, and when the cumulative force of three ever-more-devastating fires had shattered the city's confidence, it was easy to blame arson for saddling the city with "a fatal paralysis."⁴³

Therein lay the double tragedy of the Great Fire of 1838. Not only was it to that time Charleston's most destructive fire; it exposed—or fed—a paralysis which kept the city from responding rationally and coherently. As a body politic, Charleston could not reorganize to meet the threat of future fire; as individuals, Charlestonians transformed reasonable fear into immobilizing paranoia. Already haunted by the memory of Denmark Vesey's planned insurrection, they were now traumatized by fire. Not surprisingly many of them envisioned an incendiary conspiracy among their slaves. In June alone eighteen arson attempts were reported; and each time slaves were immediately arrested and questioned.⁴⁴ Though virtually none were convicted, the nature of white Charlestonians' response gave them away.

In his sermon delivered immediately after the Great Fire, Thomas Smyth had dramatized the pervasive fear of social collapse which fire had loosed. "How many hearts seemed to riot in joy amid the devouring flames, even as does the blood-thirsty tiger upon the carcass of the torn victim."⁴⁵ Often thereafter the fear of the tiger overwhelmed the fear of fire. Eleven years later when thirty-seven slave-inmates of the Charleston workhouse revolted and escaped, a mob of angry and frightened whites gathered before Calvary Church, being built for a black congregation, and prepared to put it to the torch. James Petigru, Charleston's persistent voice of measured reason, faced them down. "How can you be such damned fools . . .? Have you not seen enough of fire here to be afraid of it? It is the only thing that decent men are afraid of!"⁴⁶

⁴³ [Henry L. Pinckney], Address of the Citizens of Charleston to the Governor of South Carolina, MS dated April 4, 1838, should be May 4, 1838, Legislative Papers, City of Charleston, Petitions (on the burning of the city), South Carolina Archives. Also appears in *Mercury*, May 5, 1838.

⁴⁴ Henry L. Pinckney, *A Report, Containing a Review of the Proceedings of the City Authorities, from the 4th September 1837, to the 1st August 1838* (Charleston, 1838), pp. 43-44.

⁴⁵ Smyth, *Two Discourses* (Discourse Second), p. 17.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Robert Durden, "The Establishment of Calvary Protestant Episcopal Church for Negroes in Charleston," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, LXV (April 1964), 73, from James Petigru Carson, *The Life, Letters, and Speeches of James Louis Petigru: The Union Man of South Carolina* (Washington, 1920), p. 280.

ciety, who was even perhaps "mentally unbalanced."³ Four decades ago, a noted South Carolina journalist, distraught by this common assessment of Brooks, commented, "I assert that the impression that Mr. Brooks was a 'Southern ruffin' is the veriest nonsense . . . I have known many men who in youth were neighbors and friends of Mr. Brooks and never did I or other South Carolinians hear one of them mention him except as the opposite character commonly drawn in history books."⁴

Yet, despite such an assertion, interest in obtaining a more objective understanding of Brooks's background, character, and motives, has been lacking. Apparently the absence of a large repository of Brooks's correspondence has discouraged scholars from seriously investigating his life and correcting many of the myths concerning his character and his motivation for the assault upon Sumner. Perhaps also the unsavory image of Brooks has discouraged interest in pursuing an adequate inquiry. In general, the treatment of Brooks provides an excellent example of how, through historical negligence, grave distortions can be routinely conveyed from one secondary account to another and eventually gain widespread acceptance as truth.

The pivotal event in Brooks's life was his encounter with Sumner, the basic facts of which are well known and need not be recounted here in great detail. On May 19 and 20, 1856, Charles Sumner, forty-five year old Senator from Massachusetts, delivered a carefully prepared speech, "The Crime Against Kansas," in which he assailed Southerners in general and then indulged in an acrimonious personal attack on Andrew Pickens Butler, a quiet gray-haired Senator from South Carolina. The Massachusetts solon described Butler, who was absent from the Senate at the time, as the "Don Quixote" of slavery who had taken "harlot Slavery" as a "mistress." Sumner also condemned South Carolina for a conspicuous absence of "heroic spirit," and denounced that state's history, constitution, and progress.⁵ Such vehement language in spontaneous debate was not uncommon, however, Sumner's speech was meticulously drafted and in the process of being printed at the time of its delivery.

³ See especially: Thomas A. Bailey, *The American Pageant, A History of the Republic* (Lexington, Mass., 1971), p. 424; John A. Garraty, *The American Nation, A History of the United States to 1877* (New York, 1971), p. 457; Dumas Malone and Basil Rauch, *Crisis of the Union, 1841-1877* (New York, 1960), p. 121.

⁴ William Watts Ball, *The State That Forgot, South Carolina's Surrender to Democracy* (Indianapolis, 1932), pp. 97-98.

⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, I Session, Appendix, pp. 529-544. The most thorough biography of Sumner's early career is: David Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York, 1960).

One of the most attentive visitors in the Senate Chamber during the first day of Sumner's speech was Representative Brooks, Butler's cousin who was outraged by the remarks he heard. After vainly waiting two days for an apology and repeatedly pouring over the printed version of the speech, the South Carolinian impatiently entered the Senate chamber in the early afternoon of May 22, 1856. Although the regular proceedings had adjourned, he found the Bay State Senator busily writing at his desk. Brooks approached and brazenly stated, "Mr. Sumner, I have read your last speech with care and as much impartiality as possible under the circumstances, and I feel it my duty to say that you have libeled my State and slandered my kinsman who is aged and absent and I have come to punish you for it." Instantly the angry Carolinian began to strike Sumner about the head and shoulders with his gutta percha cane. Sumner, unable to defend himself and momentarily pinned in his desk, finally rose from his chair, but what Brooks later described as "about 30 first rate stripes" dazed him and he fell to the floor as a crowd gathered to stop the attack.

Until this momentous day, Brooks, except for a somewhat impetuous early life, had established a reputation for moderation. Born in Edgefield in 1819, he grew up in an aristocratic atmosphere of culture and learning. His father, Whitfield Brooks, an influential lawyer and politician, had an admirable reputation as "a man of science, of liberal education, and polished manners." His mother, Mary Carroll Brooks, was "a most estimable lady."⁶ The young Brooks, in preparation for a prominent role in society, attended both Moses Waddel's School at Willington and South Carolina College at Columbia. As an aspiring scholar he exhibited an appealing personality which earned him a position of leadership among his peers. He was described by a childhood acquaintance as "tall and commanding, standing six feet in his stockings, . . . a brunette, and remarkably handsome." At Waddel's School he supposedly "endeared himself to every boy . . . by his manly and generous qualities of character."⁷ As a student at South Carolina College, Brooks caused the administration great consternation by maintaining an acceptable academic

⁶ *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, III Session, p. 500; John Belton O'Neill, *Biographical Sketches of the Bench and Bar of South Carolina* (Charleston, 1859), II, 473-474; John A. Chapman, *History of Edgefield County* (Newberry, S. C., 1897), pp. 44-47, 265-266, 510-518. Whitfield Brooks did not become governor of South Carolina as indicated in: Alvy L. King, *Louis T. Wigfall, Southern Fire-Eater* (Baton Rouge, 1970), p. 35.

⁷ *Charleston Courier*, February 5, 1857; *Augusta Constitutionalist*, June 12, 1856.

record while frequently missing classes to visit the taverns in Columbia. During this formative period of his life he also became known as "a favorite with the ladies." Only his capable scholarship apparently saved him from being abruptly dismissed from college on several occasions. Among his classmates he was celebrated for his "generous chivalry, and unselfish impulse." According to one fellow student, "his heart was large but he had no room or place for petty trickeries and jealousies of selfish ambitions, or coldly plodding calculations."⁸

As Brooks matured he was not unaccustomed to controversy, for he lived in a region that has been described as having "more dashing, brilliant, romantic figures, statesmen, orators, soldiers, adventurers, dare-devils, than any county of South Carolina, if not of any rural county in America."⁹ Despite his distaste for aggressive and violent behavior, Brooks as a young man often found himself thrust into positions which, according to the accepted code of honor among Southern gentlemen, required personal accountability. As a student at South Carolina College he engaged in a scuffle with a fellow student after a petty dispute over the outcome of a school election. The brief confrontation, which occurred when Brooks adamantly refused to duel, led to expulsion for his adversary, but only temporary suspension for him. Another imprudent episode took place just before his graduation, when he heard an exaggerated account of his brother being subjected to "ignominious treatment" in the Columbia jail. Brooks, impulsively waving a brace of pistols, rushed to the jail where he was quickly disarmed without incident. The exasperated faculty used this latter event, which came after they had developed a repugnance for Brooks's truancy and his relaxed academic attitude, to withhold his degree from the college.¹⁰

The young Brooks also had occasion to become entangled in local family and political feuds, most notably in those relating to two controversial neighbors, George Tillman and Louis Wigfall. In a brief and bizarre episode Brooks had a minor noninjurious encounter with the erratic Tillman who uncontrollably resented the snobbishness of the Brooks family and other members of the "upper circle" in Edgefield.¹¹

⁸ *Charleston Courier*, January 29, 1857.

⁹ Ball, *The State That Forgot*, p. 22.

¹⁰ Daniel Walker Hollis, *University of South Carolina* (Columbia, 1951), I, 138-139.

¹¹ Francis Butler Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman, South Carolinian* (Baton Rouge, 1967), p. 32. Brooks later as a Congressman gave generous assistance to members of both the Tillman and Wigfall families. *Augusta Constitutionalist*, June 12, 1856; *Charleston Courier*, February 19, 1857.

The more serious encounter with Wigfall, growing out of a longstanding political rivalry that had been heightened by the gubernatorial race in 1840, resulted in a duel which left both participants seriously wounded. Brooks had avoided his belligerent foe until after Wigfall had posted his father as a "scoundrel and coward," killed one relative in a duel, and duelled with another relative.¹²

Undue emphasis upon these early encounters can lead to a misrepresentation of Brooks's basic character. Though undoubtedly guilty of some rash and immature behavior in his youth, he generally avoided violence unless pushed to an extreme. Overall, his contemporaries consistently viewed him as a rational non-impulsive person in his varied duties as a planter, lawyer, state legislator, and volunteer soldier. They almost unanimously depicted him as a man "of kind heart and the most tender sensibilities," who maintained "a calm and imperturbable dignity" and "ever exhibited the serene, cheerful, and determined bearing of the soldier and gentleman." He was "prominently frank, open, and manly," and "in his relations with others considerate and kind."¹³ An excellent example of his youthful reputation for prudence came in 1844 when Governor James Henry Hammond relied upon Brooks, as his aide-de-camp, to obtain the orderly removal from Charleston of Samuel Hoar, an uninvited emissary of the Massachusetts legislature who came to investigate the treatment of Negro seamen. In effecting Hoar's expulsion, the Governor felt that it was "of the greatest importance that all should be concluded decently and with such a tone of quiet and air of dignity as will show the world that we are acting more from principle than impulse." Of the person to whom he entrusted this delicate mission, Hammond confidently remarked, "Brooks is young and ardent, but not without judgment."¹⁴

Brooks, during his mature life, deplored all acts of needless violence. Once, when admonishing a friend who asked to borrow his duelling case, he forthrightly condemned the practice of defending "honor" through

¹² James Henry Hammond Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; especially: J. P. Carroll to Hammond, June 12, 1841; M. L. Bonham to Hammond, June 15, 1841; and "Diary, 1837-1855," entries for February 9, June 20, June 24, and June 29, 1841. See also: King, *Wigfall*, pp. 25-35; Mrs. D. Giraud Wright, *A Southern Girl in '61: The War-Time Memories of a Confederate Senator's Daughter* (New York, 1905), p. 31.

¹³ *Savannah (Ga.) Morning News*, January 30, 1857; *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, III Session, pp. 500-502; *The New York Times*, January 3, 1857; *Charleston Courier*, February 5, 1857.

¹⁴ James Henry Hammond to Henry Bailey, December 5, 1844, Brooks to Hammond, December 6, 1844, Hammond Papers.

violence as "the bane and plague of humane society."¹⁵ Immediately after his tragic duel with Wigfall he confided to the physician who was attending his wound, "Well, Doctor, I have shown I am not a coward, and I never will be engaged in a duel again for in my conscience I do think it to be wrong."¹⁶ On another occasion he intervened to prevent a duel between two rival newspaper editors of Richmond, Virginia.¹⁷ Further evidence of his profound dislike for violence was provided later when as a Congressman he denounced personal altercations in the House, which he considered "at variance with its discourse, and detracting from the dignity of the American Congress." He even suggested that any member who brought a "concealed weapon" into the House should be promptly expelled.¹⁸

Upon completing his studies at South Carolina College, Brooks engaged in a variety of activities. Driven by an ambition to succeed, he surmounted his aversion to serious study, diligently read law, and successfully sought a position in the state legislature in 1844. As a neophyte politician he maintained an unobtrusive profile, yet he did acquire some recognition for independence of thought. Commenting upon one of Brooks's public orations in 1847 a constituent noted, "I was particularly struck and pleased with the nationality of his address—with the happy manner and patriotic fervor with which he repelled all local prejudices and sectional jealousies." Brooks demonstrated great skill as a campaigner and always enjoyed the confidence of his constituents. A close friend observed, "The readiness of his wit, the brilliancy and point of his conversation, and the winningness of his manners, delighted and won the hearts of the people."¹⁹ When the War with Mexico came Brooks served as captain of a company, which he raised in Edgefield, in the Palmetto Regiment. His prominence as a military figure enhanced his popularity, however, severe illness forced him to return home after only a brief service. When the war ended he became an eminently successful planter, with a keen interest in politics.

Brooks's early political positions furthered his reputation. In 1852 he joined a successful movement to thwart an attempt by "irreconcilable"

¹⁵ *Charleston Courier*, February 23, 1857.

¹⁶ J. P. Carroll to James H. Hammond, June 19, 1841, Hammond Papers.

¹⁷ *Charleston Courier*, February 18, 1857, and February 23, 1857.

¹⁸ *Congressional Globe*, 33 Congress, I Session, pp. 1466, 1477.

¹⁹ *Charleston Courier*, January 29, 1857; *Augusta (Ga.) Constitutionalist*, June 12, 1856. In 1841 Brooks married Caroline Harper Means. When she died in 1843 he married her cousin Martha Caroline Means. "Thomas Means and Some of His Descendants," this *Magazine*, VII (October, 1906), 204-216.

Democrats in South Carolina to break away from the national party, and his energetic involvement in this effort led to his taking a seat in the House of Representatives in 1853. As a Congressman, Brooks, possessing an amiable demeanor, emerged as a "general favorite." A colleague noted that he had "many warm personal friends even among his political opponents at a time of unusual party bitterness." Though he seldom spoke at length or with profound wisdom on any subject, his speeches were described as "full of vigor and sprightliness." A fellow Carolinian observed that his "eloquence, openness, candor and sincerity . . . won him the respect of all, even those who were not convinced by his arguments."²⁰ On the major issues before Congress he purposefully avoided extreme positions. For example, on the turbulent question of whether a transcontinental railroad should be constructed along a Southern or Northern route, he pleaded with members of Congress to "suppress all sectional feelings," noting that "sectional jealousies are the bane of national advancement." During the process of selecting a temporary Speaker of the House in January of 1856, Brooks denounced his fellow Southerner, William R. Smith, a nativist advocate from Alabama, by stating: "I would vote for Nathaniel P. Banks or Joshua R. Giddings [both open anti-slavery leaders] a thousand times in preference to that gentleman [Smith]. . . . I will never vote for any man who is the enemy of religious freedom." In 1855 Brooks magnanimously assisted a Massachusetts citizen whose claim for compensation from the Government had been twice defeated, primarily by Southern votes.²¹

For his moderate legislative positions Brooks soon found that he was frequently "taunted at home with being a little too national." Yet he avowed, "My devotion to my state . . . requires not to be propped by cultivation of sectional sentiments."²² This attitude impressed many of his Northern associates. The venerable New York abolitionist Gerrit Smith, who enjoyed the company of Brooks at social functions, found the young Congressman to be "a frank, pleasant man." Likewise, an editor of *The New York Times* described Brooks as "a man of generous nature, of kindly feelings and of manly impulses, warmly attached to his friends, and by no means relentless or vindictive towards his foes."²³

²⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, III Session, pp. 500-502.

²¹ *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, I Session, p. 189; *Boston Post*, quoted in *Charleston Courier*, February 19, 1857.

²² *Congressional Globe*, 33 Congress, I Session, p. 375, Appendix, p. 926, 34 Congress, I Session, p. 77.

²³ Ralph Volney Harlow, *Gerrit Smith, Philanthropist and Reformer* (New York, 1939), pp. 319, 349; *The New York Times*, January 29, 1857.

For his sagacious conduct Brooks even received a somewhat favorable assessment from the *National Era*, an anti-slavery journal, which described him as "always a Southern gentleman in . . . his courtesy, in the loftiness of his bearing and in the bitterness and scorn of his denunciations." It added, "He is a young gentleman of fine appearance, of good information and fair elocution. . . ." ²⁴

After Brooks had established such a broad reputation for temperance and forbearance, it is not surprising that Robert Charles Winthrop, a veteran Massachusetts politician who was objectively seeking to understand the Sumner-Brooks affair, queried a Southern friend, "How could any highminded and honorable man, as Mr. Brooks is represented to be considered in Carolina, have taken such a mode and place of redress and have proceeded to such an extreme violence?" ²⁵ To all but the avid partisans who wished simply to exploit the affair, Winthrop's question was a puzzling one. Speculations ranged from the claim that Brooks probably overreacted to "a literary illustration he did not understand," to the assertion, made significantly by a sympathetic associate, that but "for liquor he [Brooks] would never have committed his enormous crime." ²⁶ The inability of his more responsible contemporaries to explain adequately Brooks's assault upon Sumner reemphasizes the fact that such an act was not consistent with the reputation which he had hitherto established.

There seems little doubt of the sincerity of Brooks's indignation over the rancorous language which the Massachusetts Senator had employed. In fact, the vehemence of his words almost seemed to indicate that Sumner hoped to arouse the ire of South Carolinians. Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan unhesitatingly labeled Sumner's speech as "the most un-American and unpatriotic that ever grated the ears of the members of the high body." Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois asked. "Is it his object to provoke some of us to kick him as we would kick a dog in the street, that he may get sympathy upon the just chastisement?" ²⁷ *The New York*

²⁴ *The National Era*, March 19, 1854.

²⁵ Robert Charles Winthrop to John J. Crittenden, June 2, 1856, in John Jordan Crittenden Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

²⁶ Moncure Daniel Conway, *Autobiography, Memoirs and Experiences* (Boston, 1904), I, 237; Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, p. 349. *The New York Times* reported that Brooks "was excited with wine, of which he had been drinking freely," January 29, 1857. See also: Theodore Parker, *The Works of Theodore Parker* (Boston, 1907-1911), XII, 380.

²⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, I Session, pp. 544-547; for a sympathetic explanation of Sumner's choice of words see: "Recollections of Charles Sumner," *Scribner's Monthly*, VIII (August, 1874), 475-490.

Times announced, "We have never considered it at all surprising that he [Brooks] shall have been greatly excited and angered by the terrible invectives of Mr. Sumner, nor that . . . he should have determined to inflict upon him some mark of personal indignity as a punishment thereof." Despite his personal hatred for Sumner, Brooks probably would not have been aroused to the extent of seeking redress if Sumner had not so blatantly assailed South Carolina and Andrew Butler. Brooks later explained that "the assault upon Sumner was not because of his political principles, but because of the insulting language in reference to my State and absent relative."²⁸

As to the mode of punishment, Brooks's decision was a very deliberate one. A fellow Congressman noted that had Brooks made Sumner accountable by "pulling his nose" or by "slapping his face" the ensuing controversy might have been short-lived.²⁹ However, the irate South Carolinian viewed the enormity of Sumner's offenses as warranting a more severe form of punishment. Brooks instantly rejected the possibility of a duel, not primarily because he felt Sumner to be unworthy of such gentlemanly treatment, as some of Brooks's defenders and many subsequent historians have asserted, but because he believed the Massachusetts Senator would sanctimoniously brush aside any challenge and perhaps diabolically institute embarrassing legal proceedings. In addition, his sincere opposition to duelling undoubtedly influenced his decision. Brooks also considered the use of a "cowhide" but eliminated this instrument of punishment due to the fear that his powerful adversary might wrest it from him.³⁰

Of great significance in the final determination was Brooks's conclusion merely to humiliate Sumner, not to "injure him seriously." Thus, he chose for the chastisement a hollow walking cane, which could and did splinter easily, rather than a more formidable weapon. However, the building tensions of two days of brooding, during which he was un-

²⁸ *Augusta Constitutionalist*, May 27, 1856; *The New York Times*, January 29, 1857; *Washington Star*, quoted in the *Charleston Courier*, July 12, 1856; "Statement by Preston S. Brooks," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, LXI (1927-1928), 223. For a reference to Brooks being tormented by the "sexual allusions" see: Fawn M. Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens, Scourge of the South* (New York, 1959), p. 125.

²⁹ *The National Era*, September 25, 1856; *Augusta Constitutionalist*, June 12, 1856.

³⁰ "Statement by Brooks," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, LXI (1927-1928), 222; Robret L. Meriwether, ed., "Preston S. Brooks on the Caning of Charles Sumner," this *Magazine*, LII (January, 1951), 3; *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, I Session, Appendix, p. 832.

doubtedly primed by such volatile friends as his colleague Lawrence Keitt of South Carolina, together with his sincere outrage at Sumner's language, his nagging concern for Sumner's ability to retaliate, and perhaps his excessive consumption of wine, apparently combined to cause Brooks to strike with maddening fury once the assault began. And thus, as an associate noted, in "a moment of impetuosity and excitement" Brooks committed "an act which his own better judgment" would "condemn." When appearing in court on charges of assault and battery, for which he was fined three hundred dollars, Brooks revealed a modicum of remorse for the unexpected seriousness of his act when he informed the judge: "I confess, sir, . . . that my sensibilities are disturbed by my novel position, and I have but to express my profound regret . . . to approach you as a violator, and not a maker of laws."³¹

The historical reputation of Brooks has been largely shaped by the distorted image which self-seeking propagandists created in the aftermath of the episode. Virtually every Northern town had a meeting to express sympathy for Sumner and angry Northerners often hanged Brooks in effigy.³² Most active in shaping the Northern public response were the more aggressive leaders of the Republican party and the anti-slavery movement. In their calculated propaganda Sumner emerged as a "defenseless" advocate of freedom who was "brutally" beaten with a "bludgeon" by "Bully Brooks,"³³ an allegedly typical representative of the decadent slaveholding oligarchy. In South Carolina, except for a few "irreconcilables" and "fireeaters," the initial response was mild and somewhat mixed. However, the sensational use of the affair by Northern propagandists in their attempt to vilify the South and thus further their own selfish cause created alarm and indignation among many Southern moderates. Senator Butler accurately asserted that "it was not until after those overwhelming Northern meetings that meetings were held in the South."³⁴ Large gatherings in Charleston, Columbia, Grahamville, and Beaufort expressed enthusiastic endorsement for the caning. Indeed, all over the state the masses with near unanimity applauded the conduct of

³¹ *The National Era*, July 17, 1856; *Savannah Morning News*, July 9, 1856; *Charleston Courier*, July 12, 1856.

³² For the best general survey of the Northern reaction see: Donald, *Sumner*, pp. 298-301. A sampling of general Southern opinion is found in: Avery O. Craven, *The Growth of Southern Nationalism, 1848-1861* (Baton Rouge, 1953), pp. 232-236.

³³ *Republican Campaign Documents of 1856. A Collection of the Most Important Speeches and Documents Issued by the Republican Association of Washington During the Presidential Campaign of 1856* (Washington, D. C., 1857); *Disunion Document No. 1. Speech of Honorable Preston S. Brooks* (Boston, 1856).

³⁴ *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, I Session, Appendix, p. 664.

Brooks. From his supporters Brooks received resolutions of approbation and gratitude, as well as gifts of pitchers, goblets, and canes.³⁵

The adulation for Brooks continued throughout the summer. It intensified when an abortive attempt was made to expel the young Representative from the House. Brooks, who was noticeably silent in the turbulent aftermath of the assault, resigned his position, though remained in Washington.³⁶ On July 28, 1856, his constituents not only elected him without opposition, but they also contributed money to pay for the fine for caning Sumner.³⁷ A second wave of excited tributes came as the First Session of the Thirty-Fourth Congress neared adjournment and Brooks returned to South Carolina for the first time since the encounter with Sumner. The *Charleston Courier* surmised: "Col. Brooks will scarcely find time to partake of the compliments and testimonials, as all portions of the State are claiming his attention."³⁸

As the central figure in an atmosphere of deep and bitter sectional antagonism, Brooks found his character and beliefs being systematically distorted. Never having desired to become a focus for the verbal warfare of the 1850s, Brooks responded with an uncertainty marked by contradictions. In a speech in South Carolina he humbly declared, "For inflicting merited punishment the entire South has applauded and commended me, and placed me in the position as representative." On the other hand, he was painfully aware that in the North he was considered "a fair sample of every slaveholder" or "the type, the result, of the effect of slavery." He lamented, "I feel that my individuality has in great measure been destroyed." The *South Carolinian* revealed several times his bewilderment and remorse for the controversy which he had unintentionally created. He informed his constituents: "I do not merit the extent that your generosity fancies that I do." Significantly, Brooks

³⁵ For an excellent brief explanation of the South Carolina reaction see: Harold Schultz, *Nationalism and Sectionalism in South Carolina, 1852-1860* (Durham, N. C., 1950), pp. 115-120. The Southern reaction can be followed in the following newspapers: *Charleston Courier*, *Savannah Morning News*; *Augusta Constitutionalist*; *Raleigh Register*; *New Orleans Bee*; *Richmond Whig*; *The New York Times*; and *The National Era*.

³⁶ For the proceedings of the House Committee see: "Alleged Assault Upon Senator Sumner," *House Reports*, No. 182, 34 Congress, I Session. Pertinent material can also be found in: Lawrence Massillon Keitt Papers, Manuscript Division, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University.

³⁷ *Columbia Times*, quoted in *Charleston Courier*, August 2, 1856; *Charleston Courier*, July 22, 1856.

³⁸ *Columbia South Carolinian*, quoted in *Charleston Courier*, September 1, 1856; *Charleston Courier*, October 7, 1856.

avoided personal appearances at most of the celebrations that were scheduled in his honor.³⁹

As inspired orators from all regions of South Carolina shouted defiance for the North and praise for the South's "gallant" defender, Brooks came under increasing pressure to speak out for the cause he allegedly championed. Finally, and almost predictably, Brooks yielded to the incessant demands of his emotional admirers who wanted him as their spokesman. Speaking in his home district on October 3, 1856, the harassed Congressman made an absurd statement: "I have been a disunionist since the time I could think." To the delight of the cheering crowd of supporters, he further asserted, "The Constitution of the United States should be torn to fragments and a Southern Constitution formed in which every State should be a slave state."⁴⁰ Regretfully, the uncritical acceptance of the integrity of these remarks, the most quoted of any that the South Carolinian ever made, has had an adverse impact upon Brooks's historical reputation equal to, if not greater than, the caning itself. Nevertheless, it was soon evident that these inflammatory words did not express his true feelings. The *Charleston Courier* described the lapse as the result of this "national and union loving" man being "frighted . . . from his propriety [sic]."⁴¹ A Virginia Congressman, J. M. Botts, who had unequivocally denounced the assault, observed that "the compliments he [Brooks] has received from his warmhearted, enthusiastic, but injudicious friends in the South, and the taunts and abuses heaped upon him at the North, have served to bewilder and mislead his judgment in much that has transpired since, as it was well calculated to do."⁴²

Since, as a political leader Brooks was the man "upon whom . . . the mantle of Calhoun seemed to have fallen loosely for the moment," it is indeed remarkable that the speech in his home district was the only publicized instance after the caning that his nationalism faltered.⁴³ Because he emerged as a symbolic defender of all Southern grievances,

³⁹ *Charleston Courier*, June 17, 1856; Meriwether, "Preston S. Brooks," p. 4; *The New York Times*, October 8, 1856.

⁴⁰ *Charleston Courier*, October 7, 1856. When the *Carolina Times* reported that Brooks in this speech had referred to himself as a "fighting" representative of his state, he quickly wrote a public protest insisting that he had carefully avoided the use of the word "fighting." *Ibid.*, October 9, 1856.

⁴¹ *Charleston Courier*, January 29, 1857.

⁴² *The National Era*, September 25, 1856; John Minor Botts, *The Great Rebellion: Its Secret History, Rise, Progress, and Disastrous Failure* (New York, 1866), p. 191.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 163.

he became certainly the most honored man in South Carolina and probably the most highly admired as well. Many political opportunists openly suggested him as a candidate for governor and some rebellious citizens were even considering him as "the first President of the Southern Republic."⁴⁴ Yet, significantly, after the extreme statements to his constituents, Brooks resolutely resisted the temptation to seek further personal aggrandizement, declined to make additional disunionist speeches, and discreetly resumed his support for the Constitution and the national Democrats.⁴⁵

After returning to Congress in the fall of 1856, Brooks carefully avoided any involvement in public controversy. In his only lengthy oration he addressed himself to the difficulties in "Bleeding Kansas." In a deliberate, unemotional address he unexpectedly announced that he was prepared to vote for the admission of Kansas "even with a constitution rejecting slavery."⁴⁶ The relative mildness and conciliatory nature of this speech undoubtedly astonished some of his Northern foes and disappointed many of his "fire-eating" constituents. Yet, by the winter of 1856 Brooks was obviously growing weary of the public attention that centered upon him and dismayed by the hostile attitudes of former Northern friends. Though never doubting the justice of his caning of Sumner, he developed strong misgivings about the controversy which it had caused. He supposedly confided to Congressman James L. Orr of South Carolina that he was "tired of his new role" and "heartsick of being recognized the representative of bullies, the recipient of their ostentatious gifts and officious testimonials of admiration and regard." The editor of *The New York Times* remarked, "We have heard that in conversation Colonel Brooks more than once deplored his conduct as the blot and misfortune of his life."⁴⁷

Suddenly, soon after the beginning of the new year of 1857, tragedy struck. Almost as quickly as he had decided to punish Charles Sumner, death silenced Preston Brooks. The young South Carolinian was stricken by an acute inflammation of the throat and he died on January 27 at Brown's Hotel in Washington, less than a year after he had been propelled to national notoriety by a single incident. "If he had been struck

⁴⁴ Henry Baker, *Two Chapters From Oligarchy and Hierarchy* (Cincinnati, 1856), pp. 119-120.

⁴⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, III Session, p. 109. *Charleston Courier*, June 27, 1856.

⁴⁶ *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, III Session, pp. 109-111.

⁴⁷ *The New York Times*, March 30, 1857; Henry Wilson, *History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America*. (Reprint edition, New York, 1969), II, 495.

by lightning," one shocked Northern newsman noted, "the announcement could not have been more unexpected."⁴⁸

As is often the case with men who experience a meteoric, brief, and controversial rise to a position of national renown, the realities of Brooks's life have been concealed by the more enduring prejudicial images of his time. The detestable nature of his brutal act, the ultimate defeat of the cause he supposedly represented, and the greater literary production of those who were most offended by his conduct have resulted in more emphasis upon the darker of the two images that emerged before his death. Emphasis upon the "vacant chair" caused by Sumner's prolonged recovery added drama and meaning to the anti-slavery tirades for the next three years. Abraham Lincoln's frequent references during his famous debates with Stephen Douglas to Brooks's secessionist remarks at Ninety-Six helped to perpetuate the "hotspur" image. The theme of Harriett Beecher Stowe's *Dred* changed almost overnight to convey a lasting impression of her denunciation of Brooks. Also, the caricature of "Bully Brooks" provided a convenient symbol of the "violent" Southerner for the popular political cartoons of Thomas Nast. In these and other minor ways the villainous image became deeply rooted.

In retrospect, the meager and scattered facts of Brooks's life reveal him to be neither "the pride of manhood's noblest prime" nor "a cowardly assassin." In reality, freed from all the calculated distortions by adroit propagandists, Brooks emerges as a sensitive, temperamental person whose strong Unionism of the early 1850s gradually yielded to a feeling of confusion and alarm as to the future of the nation. Even before Sumner's fateful speech he was doubtlessly moving steadily toward a position of open disunionism, prompted by a conscientious though perhaps misguided, response to political and social developments. Despite such convictions, in no respect was Brooks sincerely a "rabble-rouser" or a "fire-eater," opportunistically in the vanguard of a secession movement. Likewise, he was not an undisciplined man, governed solely by passions. No part of his early behavior seems to have made it inevitable or even predictable that he was destined to commit such a violent act as the assault on Sumner. Nor, in regard to his overall competency, does it seem justifiable to render the harsh judgment, as one historian has done, that Brooks was "the type of person who should never have been in politics." Even though he was not a man of exceptional ability, only if he had, as

⁴⁸ Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 28, 1857, in Howell Cobb Collection, Special Collections, University of Georgia Library. See also: James H. Hammond to William Gilmore Simms, January 31, 1857, in Hammond Papers; *The New York Times*, January 29, 1857.

alleged, truly been a firebrand who rashly advocated violence and gloried in his own violent deeds would such a verdict seem plausible. When a frenzied act unexpectedly thrust him into a position of almost unprecedented popularity in his native state, he cautiously backed away from the enticing opportunities for power and grandeur. Unfortunately, Brooks's general composure, his compromising spirit, and his retiring though genial nature have been obscured by the emphasis upon one impulsive and unjustifiable episode, the severity of which he had not intended and the consequences of which he grew to regret.

In identifying and stressing some of the non-mythical circumstances of Brooks's life, it should not be forgotten that misconceptions, when they are accepted as truths, can have a profound impact upon the course of events. For the sake of historical justice to Brooks, his character should be stripped of all the emotional trappings added by his self-seeking contemporaries. However, for the sake of general historical accuracy, the image of Brooks as it prevailed in both the North and the South, distorted as it undoubtedly was, presents a reality which significantly influenced public opinion on the eve of the Civil War. By accepting as valid the mythical image of Brooks, many previously uncommitted Northerners and Southerners were provoked, persuaded, or cajoled into becoming avowed abolitionists or slaveryites, therefore dangerously weakening the bonds of the Union. Thus, from the moment he raised his cane to strike Sumner, the legacy of Preston Smith Brooks has necessarily remained twofold—that of the man and that of his popular image—and the careful student of the past must recognize and appreciate the importance of each.

Memorials

In memory of:

Miss Laura Bragg

Contributed by:

Miss Elise Pinckney

Dr. George C. Rogers, Jr.