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EDITORIAL

REVOLT, NOT EVOLT, MIND YOU!

By DANIEL DE LEON

F. B. Sanborn of Concord, Mass., a veteran Abolitionist and personal friend of John Brown, has in a book review a criticism of the eulogies recently uttered on old Gov. Robinson of Kansas. It is not so much the corrections of fact made by Mr. Sanborn, nor the historic data which he brings up that render his criticism particularly valuable. His criticism is valuable because, whether aware of it or not, he finds himself struggling with that ignoble stream that ever sets in when the “abject rear” steps upon the scene, selfish enough to profit by the work of the daring and inspired front ranks, but base enough to wish to snuff off the very inspiration that guided the pioneers, lest such inspiration sweep it aside. Mr. Sanborn’s criticism brings out the fact that our present social stage is that of such “abject rears,” with all that that implies.

Mr. Sanborn takes up Dr. Caulfield in particular, who in the course of his eulogy of Robinson said:

“Robinson stood for law and order, for the civic patience which endures much and suffers long, for the temper which prefers evolution to revolution.”

The warm blood of his days of active work boils up in the old friend of John Brown; with unerring instinct he detects in the expression “evolution rather than revolution” the full poltroonery that marks the expression to-day; and he turns like a terrier upon Dr. Caulfield, and shakes him all to pieces, as may be judged from the following passages:

“I knew the men who fought and the men who flinched; the men who secretly imported rifles into Lawrence marked ‘books,’ (at Robinson’s request) and the men whom he armed with them and whom he commanded as ‘Major General Robinson’ in December, 1855, when he commissioned

John Brown as captain. And when Captain Brown first came to see me in Boston in January, 1857, he brought with him as one of his credentials a sheet on which Robinson (whose handwriting I knew well) had thus written, under date of Lawrence, September 14, 1856:

“Your course, Captain Brown, so far as I have been informed, has been such as to merit the highest praise from every patriot, and I cheerfully accord to you my heartfelt thanks for your prompt, efficient and timely action against the invaders of our rights and the murderers of our citizens. History will give your name a proud place on her pages, and posterity will pay homage to your heroism in the cause of God and humanity. Trusting that you will conclude to remain in Kansas, and serve DURING THE WAR, the cause you have done so much to sustain, and with earnest prayers for your health and protection from the shafts of death that so thickly beset your path, I subscribe myself, very respectfully, your obedient servant.”

Mr. Sanborn then follows up the attack with this other passage:

“Nor did Robinson withdraw his praise of Brown for twenty years after his death in 1859; on the contrary, he heightened it. On the occasion of dedicating a monument to Brown and others, at Osawatomie, on the twenty-first anniversary of Brown’s fight, there, Robinson, who presided, said:

“The soul of John Brown was the inspiration of the Union armies in the emancipation of war, and it will be the inspiration of all men in the present and distant future who may revolt (not evolt, mind you!) against tyranny and oppression; because he dared to be a traitor to the government, that he might be loyal to humanity. To the superficial observer John Brown was a failure. So was Jesus of Nazareth. Both suffered ignominious death as traitors to the government; yet one is now hailed as the saviour of a world from sin, and the other of a race from bondage.”

Mr. Sanborn then dismisses Dr. Caulfield with the well-deserved contempt contained in these parting words:

“I fear Dr. Caulfield is better read in history books than in the lore of the human heart. He says of Brown, in academic phrase, ‘His place and value in our history, in world-history, are still mysterious, not easily defined, even questionable. His life and character and purpose and methods do not yield readily to analysis.’ Try synthesis, then Doctor! Do not imitate Wordsworth’s aversion:

“Philosopher? A fingering slave!

“One that would peep and botanize

“Upon his mother’s grave.’

“The feeblest human heart, reverencing courage and unselfish devotion, finds synthesis for the hero and the martyr; and all the universities between the Pottawatomie and the Nile cannot reason us out of homage to those who died for mankind.”

It is not the Dr. Caulfield alone, but the whole brood of Caulfields—the ignominious “abject rear”—that Mr. Sanborn pillories.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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