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Review: 'The Great Abolitionist' a vivid, eloquent biography of Senator Charles Sumner

- By Rosemary Michaud Special to The Post and Courier
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THE GREAT ABOLITIONIST: Charles Sumner and the Fight for a More Perfect Union. By Stephen Puleo. St. Martin's Press. 464 pages. \$32.

When Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts died in Washington, D.C., in 1874, Frederick Douglass and a “great assemblage of colored men” followed his hearse to the Capitol where his body lay in state under the rotunda. He was the first U.S. senator to be so honored. Thousands of mourners filed past.

In his native Boston, a stricken populace filled the street as they accompanied Sumner's coffin from the Statehouse to King's Chapel, and from there to a simple grave in Mount Auburn Cemetery across the Charles River in Cambridge.

Sumner had his first exposure to the nation's “peculiar institution” in 1834, at 23, on a trip to Washington when he observed enslaved people toiling in the fields near Baltimore. In 1849, as a lawyer, he defended, unsuccessfully, a 6-year-old African American girl whose family wanted her to attend a neighborhood school instead of the much more distant school for Black children to which she had been assigned.

It was an eerie adumbration of Boston's later troubles with school desegregation, and occurred in a period when Black men in Massachusetts could serve as, and vote for, members of school boards and, theoretically, run for lieutenant governor and even governor.

It was the beginning of Sumner's passionate, relentless, decades-long battle to bring down the system he believed was contrary to what the founding documents stood for. To say that Sumner was uncompromising in his beliefs would be a gross understatement.

Incapable of moderation, he was, as historian Stephen Puleo characterizes him in "The Great Abolitionist," "unbribable and unbuyable," for he "never backed down, never tempered his remarks, never prevaricated."

One of the great orators of the 19th century, his speeches castigating the "slavocracy" were so powerfully vivid, inflammatory and on point that, in 1856, an enraged South Carolina House Representative Preston Brooks reacted to one by savagely caning the unarmed Sumner who, trapped behind his desk, could not fight back.

The attack surely still stands as the most cowardly act of physical viciousness ever perpetrated on the floor of the Senate. It took years for Sumner to recover from his injuries and, in some ways, he never did.

Sumner showed little mercy for his own contemporaries in Massachusetts — rich textile merchants, "Cotton Whigs" who accepted slavery as the price that must be paid for the cheap cotton that supplied their mills. It was Charles Sumner who so brilliantly coined the phrase, "lords of the lash and lords of the loom."

While Puleo's biography is largely a paean to Sumner the public figure, the author also offers a nuanced picture of his subject. Sumner, whose close friendships included

that of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier and, oddly, Mary Todd Lincoln, was largely a loner who had a chilly relationship with his parents and, except for one sister, his siblings.

He struggled in social situations to the point where he may have been, in modern parlance, “on the spectrum.” His one marriage, at 55, to a woman 30 years younger ended disastrously.

Puleo contends that Sumner’s arguments in favor of racial freedom and equality before the law influenced much of the civil rights legislation that followed, up to and including *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, and the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of the mid-1960s. Sumner was also very much ahead of his time in demanding the end of segregation in conveyances. Fortunately, he did not live long enough to be aware of the landmark 1895 Supreme Court decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which set that cause back decades.

Puleo is an excellent writer, at times as eloquent as the subject of this study, and he poses an interesting question. Given Sumner’s stature, why is this book the first full biography of him in 50 years? The reader is left wondering the same thing.

“The Great Abolitionist,” richly sourced, informative and eminently readable, more than adequately fills the void.

Reviewer **Rosemary Michaud** is a regular contributor to the book page.