

John Brown's Cultural Legacy

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David S. Reynolds. *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*. New York: Knopf, 2005. 578 pp. + x. Illus.

JOHN Brown, the leader of the assault on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in 1859, is one of the most polarizing figures in American history. Therefore, it should not be surprising that there has been sharp and even bitter disagreement among biographers since his execution. Soon after his death, the school of pro-Brown partisanship was advanced by James Redpath's *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (1860), to be followed by F. B. Sanborn's *Life and Letters of John Brown* (1885). Sanborn, one of the so-called Secret Six who financed and supported the Harpers Ferry raid and a committed chronicler of the Transcendentalist movement, shared Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau's admiration for Brown's courage and conviction. The generally admiring responses of the Transcendentalists, including that of other supporters like Thomas Wentworth Higginson, are amply documented and discussed in this richly detailed biography by David S. Reynolds.

The extremes of hagiography and vilification, to use Reynolds's own terms, that colored responses to Brown's motives and actions did not encounter scholarly objectivity among biographers until the early twentieth century. Fifty years after Brown's raid, Oswald Garrison Villard published *John Brown: 1800–1859* (1910), a volume that offered praise for his subject's noble motives while expressing reservations for his questionable methods. Among more contemporary treatments, Stephen B. Oates's *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (1973) is based on a professional biographer's more comprehensive and nuanced consultation of a range of documentary sources. Oates also stresses Brown's stern Calvinist background in attempting to account for his fierce rhetoric and combat against his proslavery adversaries. Reynolds confirms Oates's view that Brown's values had deep roots in America's religious heritage, and he forthrightly claims that his overall role in Civil War history, despite wide acknowledgment of the importance of Harpers Ferry, has still been underestimated. If, as Reynolds suggests by quoting the southerner Chauncy Burr that the war was "a stupendous John Brown raid" waged by the North, Brown's strategies, goals, and his influence on leaders, writers, and artists must be given its just due. Thus Reynolds attempts a fullscale cultural biography by taking Brown's measure, not just against the backdrop of events, but amid the social pressures and conditions that forged his values and actions as well as his critics' sharpest attacks. Much of Reynolds's attention focuses on Brown's progressive racial views and the ways that they outshone those of even the most celebrated antislavery advocates like William Lloyd Garrison. In his eloquent "A Plea for Capt. John Brown" and "The Last Days of John Brown," Thoreau articulated the paradox that Brown was never more alive than after his hanging. This statement and others by Brown's admirers and detractors lead Reynolds to a wideranging examination of the Brown legacy among thinkers, writers, and artists both in the nineteenth century and in our own time. If the subject of cultural biography should reflect not only his own time but also transcend it and have a significant impact after his passing, Brown impressively fulfills those criteria.

The author of *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America* (1981), Reynolds devotes significant attention to Brown's religious upbringing. His father Owen was a fervent admirer of the writings of Jonathan Edwards. Brown developed his antislavery stance early in his life, and in the spirit of his Calvinist upbringing, he apparently had a conversion experience at the age of sixteen. He expounded the value of the

Golden Rule, which was rooted in his family in direct dealings with family members and with black people. He was born at a time when there was no organized antislavery movement; Garrison's New England Slavery Society was not established until 1832. The elder Brown passed along his admiration for Edwards to his son, who felt that slavery violated Biblical and American principles. Reynolds situates Brown firmly within a longstanding Puritan tradition, and among antislavery agitators, Brown may have been unique in that regard. Reynolds distinguishes Brown's religious views from others in the antislavery vanguard, who by and large were more liberal minded in applying a religious critique to the slave system. According to Higginson, Brown may have been the only abolitionist who was not also a radical in religion.

The path of nonresistance in the abolitionist movement was taken by figures like Garrison, Abby Kelley Foster, and Stephen Foster, who felt that moral persuasion was the most powerful tool in the eradication of slavery. Garrison was appalled by the Nat Turner insurrection in Virginia in 1831, but fairly early in his life, Brown felt that pacifism would be impotent in confronting the depth of Southern commitment to slavery. Brown admired Turner as well as Cinque, the leader of an 1837 slave rebellion aboard the Spanish schooner *Amistad*. Also among the more notorious "travelers and outlaws," to use Higginson's phrase, was Denmark Vesey, who had attempted to launch a slave uprising to take Charleston, South Carolina, in 1820. The influence of these slave rebels moved Brown to support insurrectionary violence, and he also offered direct aid to blacks via the Underground Railroad and other means. One of the more fascinating sections of Reynolds's volume is the discussion of Brown's interest and reading in the novel traditions of maroon culture. Brown took note of the flight and settling of rebellious slaves into wilderness communities or maroons, which they founded and protected with improvised tactics. Brown was clearly familiar with maroon communities in Virginia and the Carolinas and with similar experiments among Indians in Florida. His interest in them reflected his respect for nonwhites in general, a tolerant perspective that gave him confidence that slaves, once freed, could live autonomous lives.

After Reynolds examines the sources and influences on Brown's antislavery views, he carefully addresses his rhetoric and public statements. Of particular note is his detailed analysis of "Sambo's Mistakes," an essay that Brown wrote for a black-run newspaper in 1847. In adopting the persona of a free black, Brown reproaches patterns of conduct in white culture. The resolve shown by his carefully crafted persona, moreover,

manifests the capacity of the black population for self-education and self-improvement. Reynolds also examines Brown's 1851 address in Springfield, Massachusetts, to the League of Gileadites, an organization formed in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law. This speech was his first articulation of a plan for preemptive armed action to be waged by blacks against proslavery forces. Reynolds applauds not only Brown's innovative plan but the inclusiveness of its appeal to all segments of the American population, including women sympathetic to the abolitionist cause. Thoreau compared Brown's words to Sharp's rifles, and Reynolds subjects his speeches, letters, and writing style to thoughtful scrutiny, even comparing his statement at his final sentencing to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Reynolds offers a positive assessment of Brown's motives for improving the lot of America's black population, his moral courage, and his rhetorical abilities. *John Brown, Abolitionist* is not, however, an uncritical assessment of its biographical subject. Reynolds devotes a chapter, entitled "The Pauper," to Brown's managerial skills, which are often found wanting. In various occupations, from tanner to wool distributor, Brown was a failure, and Reynolds suggests that his antislavery passion often deflected his energies to other pursuits. In a long chapter devoted to the action that became nearly as controversial as the Harpers Ferry raid, he forthrightly calls murder the 1856 killing of five men nearby Brown's forces at Pottawatomie Creek in Kansas. This massacre was an act of angry vengeance directed at proslavery ruffians as well as their powerful supporters outside the state.

Reynolds's volume has particular resonance in 2005, especially in light of comparisons that can be drawn between Brown's actions and those of international and domestic terrorists like Osama Bin Laden and Timothy McVeigh. Reynolds distinguishes the motives of Brown, who consistently attempted to bring America in line with its ethical and constitutional obligations, from those of terrorists, who show total indifference to their victims. Nevertheless, in a volume in which moral certainty and rectitude seem to stand out as Brown's shining characteristics, the Pottawatomie killings remain in stark contrast to the rest of his career. Reynolds's attempts to distinguish so-called good terrorists, who carefully choose their victims in an attempt to avoid wholesale slaughter, from those indifferent to human death and suffering. One comes away from the volume with more than a sense of unease about the rightness of Brown's positions and actions, especially in the Kansas episodes leading up to the raid in Virginia. For Reynolds, the Pottawatomie killings are neither admirable nor legally

defensible, but they are explainable. Clearly responding to forces of proslavery violence, Brown improvised an act of terror born of vindictive rage; he also saw his actions as steps toward the destruction of the federal government in its existing form.

Redpath, the most ardent promoter of the Brown legend, denied his involvement in the Pottawatomie killings, while his critics saw them as heartless crimes. In defending Brown after the Harpers Ferry raid, the Transcendentalists glorified Brown's courage and viewed him as an exemplar of conscience countering unjust laws and challenging moral complacency. Whether Harpers Ferry was an act of a Cromwellian warrior upholding Higher Law or that of a solitary madman, it was more than an historical event; it was a cultural event that led to varied treatment of Brown's execution and martyrdom by eulogists, poets, dramatists, and songwriters. From a literary standpoint, the most fascinating chapters in Reynolds's volume are those devoted to responses to Brown by figures as diverse as Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and W. D. Howells. According to Reynolds, the example of Brown may have offered Melville a sense of solidity and moral certainty in the years of working on *Billy Budd*. For Melville, Brown's actions may have been more ambiguous than Reynolds suggests since they threatened the hopes of those interested in expanding human freedom by securing the union first and emancipation secondarily. Brown, of course, did not survive to witness the carnage of the Civil War as did Melville, for whom Brown was a prophetic figure in "The Portent," the poem that opened his *Battle Pieces* (1866). In that volume Melville recorded the fate of soldiers who lay in the shadow cast across the Shenandoah green by "weird John Brown." In more simple terms, Hawthorne saw Brown as a "bloodstained fanatic" who was "justly hanged." In "Year of Meteors," Whitman offered a sympathetic portrait of Brown on the scaffold but was less certain of consequences that would "dissever the union." Brown is never mentioned by name in Dickinson's poems, but Reynolds speculates that his impact may have been powerful, and that pieces by her correspondent Higginson may have sparked her interest. Howells's identification with Brown was so strong that the martyr of Harpers Ferry became almost a father figure. Young William wrote to his father, "If I were not your son, I would desire to be Old John Brown's—God Bless him!" Despite reservation about Brown's methods, Howells allowed one of his poems to be reprinted in *Echoes of Harpers Ferry* (1860), a volume of eulogies edited by Redpath that included pieces by Emerson and Thoreau.

Reynolds extends his analysis of Brown's legacy to varied expressions in popular culture, including minstrel songs and marching songs. With critical detachment, he examines the sentimentalized portrait of Brown that begins with the story that he kissed a black woman just before his execution. Reynolds says bluntly that the event never happened, though the legend was appropriated in songs, poems, and popular illustrations. Brown became a central figure in plays in which the events of Pottawatomie and Harpers Ferry became dramatic climaxes. Reynolds also devotes thoughtful attention to poems about Brown by Edmund Clarence Stedman, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Lydia Maria Child.

Gauging Brown's impact in broader historical terms, Reynolds notes that Brown's career underscores the point that the abolition movement was "a John Brown raid on a gigantic scale." If there was never to be peace between the parties of Liberty and Slavery, Brown's recourse to violence proved prophetic of the larger battles to come. Forwardlooking in his racial outlook, he understood sooner than most that a freed black population could be an important military and political weapon in the war against the South. By firsthand experience and intuition, he understood the latent or generally unperceived potential in the black population and deliberately employed blacks in his strategic plans. He would not have been surprised by the physical courage shown by black Union troops recorded in newspaper and magazine accounts during the war and in such firstperson narratives as Higginson's *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1870), published after the conflict.

Many of Reynolds's historical claims seem valid, but his general admiration for Brown causes him to devote more complex analysis to the proBrown texts he examines than those from the opposite perspective. Works that criticize Brown are generally characterized as racist, simplistic, or as misreadings of the record. If cultural biography is to weigh expressions of social sentiment in a balanced manner, could not a critique of Brown be as complex in argument and expression as a more admiring treatment? Robert Penn Warren's *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929), to cite just one example, is quickly dismissed as a work by a depoliticized New Critic. Warren, of course, did not formulate his New Critical principles until nearly a decade after his Brown biography with *Understanding Poetry* (1938), a collaboration with Cleanth Brooks. The New Critics, of course, never declared political considerations totally extraneous to literary discussion. Warren's book on Brown, moreover, employs an original narrative technique in an attempt to understand the psychological depths of a

complex character; in many ways, the subtle interactions between idealism and the appeal of power preoccupied Warren for the rest of his career.

Written in a flexible style, Reynolds's volume is a well-documented treatment of Brown's career, his positive contributions, and legacy. Hardly oblivious to his subject's flaws, Reynolds adopts a perspective close to that of Howells, who felt that Brown's heroism outshone his flaws. In his *Stories of Ohio* (1897), a volume for schoolchildren, Howells wrote, "Some think that Brown was mad, some that he was inspired, some that he was right, some that he was wrong; but whatever men think of him, there are none who doubt that he was a hero, ready to shed blood for the cause he held just. His name can never die, so long as the name of America lives."