

John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights

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Review

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Reynolds, David S. *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, And Seeded Civil Rights.* Alfred A. Knopf, \$35.00, hardcover ISBN 375411887

Cultural context

Viewing Brown from the North and South

Shortly after John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry, Salmon P. Chase, later to become President Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury, wrote to the editor of the *Cincinnati Gazette*: Poor old man! How sadly misled by his own imaginations! How rash--how mad--how criminal then to stir up insurrection which if successful would deluge the land with blood. . . . And yet how hard to condemn him when one remembers the provocation--the unselfish desire to set free the oppressed--the bravery--the humanity towards his prisoners which defeated his purposes! It is a tragedy which will supply themes for novelists & poets for centuries--Men will condemn his act & pity his fate forever? This is precisely the John Brown that David S. Reynolds is after in his book: **John Brown, Abolitionist**. What Chase predicts in a few well chosen words is the substance of what Reynolds looks back at in his long and detailed account.

Professor Reynolds, Distinguished Professor of English and American Studies at the Brauch College of the City University of New York, has written other notably detailed books about American literature and culture. Two of special value are his study of the American Renaissance in *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (1988) and his *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (1996). Although this new John Brown biography does not measure up to the earlier works, the ground they cover certainly supplies the background for Reynolds's portrayal of Brown and his activities, and more especially the Country's reaction to them.

The biography is all there: the birth in Connecticut to puritanical parents, the early days in Ohio, the move to North Elba, New York, where the restless Brown family settled down just a bit. The years as John Brown grew into adulthood and middle age were marked not so much by abolitionist ambitions as much as occupation with a large family, numerous business failures, and related financial difficulties. John Brown had 20 children with two wives and although a number of them did not survive childhood, most of those who did were to play important roles in the agitation against slavery. One story that seems never to get its due emphasis in the John Brown saga is the story of the long suffering and neglected wives who bore the burden of being married to this restless goal-driven man. This is especially so with the second wife, Mary. Aside from the deaths of many children, she suffered the time honored fate of the woman whose husband was always claiming to be on the verge of making a secure home and never coming close to getting there. Then she suffered the isolation of the North Elba homestead, and the husband who was almost never home, while always chasing his own private obsessions and demons. Finally, she had to see him hang.

For both the family and the course of events, the business failures proved central. At long last after failure had followed failure, Brown finally found something that he was good at. John Brown was to become a very effective abolitionist and an even more effective martyr, something Brown himself made very clear in his comment as the days shortened to his hanging when he said that he was fully persuaded that I am worth inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose.

If the reader is interested in a traditional biographical narrative of John Brown's life, there are several better choices. Three very readable ones, all written in the 1970s, include Jules Abels's *Man on Fire: John Brown and the Cause of Liberty*, Stephen B. Oates's *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown*, and Richard O. Boyer's *The Legend of John Brown*, which ends with the Kansas years. An earlier biography which is the foundation of them all is a bit ponderous and old fashioned, but still a good read, the 1910 biography by Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After*.

Quite another matter, not to be scoffed at, is to read a good novel after reading a solid biography or two. Among the number of novels that feature Brown, four stand out. Leonard Ehrlich's, *God's Angry Man* (1932), Truman Nelson's *The Surveyor* (1960), which covers the Kansas years, and the truly

monumental *Cloudsplitter* (1998), by Russell Banks which takes a nice turn on the Villard biography and the fact that Brown's son Owen escaped from Harpers Ferry. In a different and decidedly light hearted mood is George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman and the Angel of the Lord* (1995). Fraser's odd hero Flashman takes Brown through an irreverent and humorous romp through history, but the details are accurate and the portrait of Brown sound and believable.

A straightforward narrative biography and least of all a novel, however, do not define the aims of Reynolds. His objective is to set Brown in the turbulent cultural context of the times. His method is to set the polemical views toward Brown, basically a North versus a South view, and then to explore the dynamics of a forceful man in the context of the events that he both manipulated and in turn was manipulated by. In this mix, four touchstones best define Brown and his activities: Calvinism, Oliver Cromwell, the New England Transcendentalists, and Modern Terrorism.

There is no doubt that Brown was governed by a fierce Calvinism inherited from his stern father. Brown was first slated for the ministry, but problems with his eyes turned him in other directions. But in good Calvinist fashion, he was always to remain certain that he was at the service of the Lord. His Calvinistic belief that the universe was controlled by an omnipotent God led him to believe that he was fated to lead the battle against slavery. As was common at the time, there seems to have been no sense of the futility of the human will against a God who determined and controlled all things. The sons who fought slavery under the influence of their father--two of them died at Harpers Ferry and others in various ways were victims of the Kansas wars and their father's zeal--did not share their father's religious certainty. Perhaps there is more to admire in the sons' activities for mere humanity's sake rather than for God's, but to separate the doubting sons from the direct influences of belief is to deny the overwhelming influence of the father's zeal. It should be noted that in all his Calvinistic intolerance Brown was tolerant of his family members' tendency to doubt.

More than any other commentator that I know, Reynolds connects Brown to the militant Calvinism of Oliver Cromwell. The parallels are remarkable, their Calvinism, their lowly beginnings, their harshness, and as Reynolds says, their tender domestic sides that were coupled with their murderous natures that led them to take innocent lives in the interest of what they saw as a higher purpose. Reynolds makes it clear that Brown quite consciously patterned himself after Cromwell. Apparently one of his favorite books was a sympathetic biography of

Cromwell written in 1848.

A special side of Brown that is not explained by his Calvinism or certainly the times in which he grew up was his special empathy with African Americans and his complete freedom from racism. Reynolds makes a strong case that no other white man on record of the time was as lacking in racial bias as was John Brown. In an age when even the most enlightened viewed blacks as a simple, lesser race, Brown insisted on taking them at their full value and as total equals, a fact well attested to in both his writing and his actions.

According to Reynolds, after Brown's hanging the New England Transcendentalists were the most important factor in the raising of Brown to legendary proportions. As many commentators have pointed out, had Brown died during the raid at Harpers Ferry and not survived to stand trial and ultimately to be hanged, there would have been no legend. In his letters, his speeches, and his calm dignity, Brown was nothing less than heroic in his final days. This time between the raid and the hanging was not only used for great effect by Brown himself, but also by such Transcendentalists as Emerson and Thoreau, who brought all of their considerable eloquence to Brown's defense, and this more than any single factor, Reynolds says, contributed to a reverence that, for many Americans, made Brown a holy figure and his activities a holy cause. For those Americans, Emerson said it best, claiming that Brown would make the gallows like the cross. That the New England Transcendentalists were central to the public perception of Brown has long been known, but Reynolds, as is his wont in his other writing, does not limit his search to obvious sources. He finds implications of Brown everywhere. For example, he betrays his literary bent and his tendency to range widely in his analysis by enlisting that famous recluse Emily Dickinson who all but totally divorced herself from the public scene for what he sees as commentary on Brown.

Although Reynolds spends much less time on the Southern reaction to Brown, he certainly does not leave it out. There was of course the well-known and well-documented loathing and hatred from that quarter, but what Reynolds adds and gives its due emphasis is the South's grudging admiration of Brown. What the South prided itself in was its chivalric codes of honor and bravery, something that will later be reflected in the moments leading to succession and the Civil War and the belief that the North lacked the backbone to stand up against the more noble, the more action prone South. In Brown and his fated raid, the South found Brown in an obverse way a brave man who followed a

code of honor in the defense of a cause that it could admire. No better indication of this can be found than in the reaction of John Wilkes Booth who was delighted to be present at Brown's hanging and certainly shared the South's deepest hatred of Brown and all he stood for, but Booth would eventually call him an inspired man, the grandest man of the century! Unlike that other hated man, Abraham Lincoln, who Booth deemed a Satan of political craftiness and deceit, Brown was a man of principle who acted with forthright courage and bravery in defense of his beliefs. For Booth and the South, Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry added a whole new color to the threat of the Abolitionists. Here was courage, here was action, and it had to be met in like manner.

The issue of whether to admire Brown or not is where Reynolds centers and ends the book. Brown's religious fervor and his commitment to a cause above all else, including innocent human life, suggests modern terrorism. Reynolds raises the specter of the likes of Timothy McVeigh and Osama Bin Laden and compares them to Brown and, without being wholly convincing, implies that while they were wrong John Brown was right. Any judgment of John Brown ultimately must center on two seminal acts of terrorism. The first and most important is the raid at Harpers Ferry which however foolhardy has been and can be defended. The other act, one much more difficult to defend, happened earlier in Kansas, the so called Pottowattomie massacre. On a May night in 1856, Brown and seven others including three of his sons and his son-in-law, killed five proslavery settlers on the banks of the Pottowattomie River. The murders were extraordinarily brutal. The victims were torn from their home and beds and hacked to death with swords in the near vicinity of their families. There seems to have been little provocation other than the men were proslavery and from the South. Reynolds tries to balance these killings against proslavery violence in Kansas and Southern lynch laws, and even the sternness of Oliver Cromwell, but he does admit that this is the hardest of all of Brown's acts to justify.

Convincing only in parts, the book is a cultural defense of Brown and yet another attempt to raise his importance in the often told story of this time in the American past, but the present is also very much a concern which is made clear in the book's long subtitle: *The Man who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*. For Reynolds, Brown is simply at the heart of the racial issue that has so troubled the American scene. Yet despite the importance of the issues, and the breadth, and at times the depth of the book, this is not a book I would recommend to those just beginning to read about John Brown. For those, however, who already know the basics of the story and want a rigorous

examination of Brown's place in the fabric of American society, the book is certain to provide a thought-provoking look at the man, who to David Reynolds's mind is America's most controversial human being. The evidence in the book makes it hard not to agree with him.

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