

The Tie That Bound Us: The Women of John Brown's Family and the Legacy of Radical Abolitionism

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Review

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Laughlin-Schultz, Bonnie *The Tie That Bound Us: The Women of John Brown's Family and the Legacy of Radical Abolitionism*. Cornell University Press, \$29.95
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A New Way to Look at an Important Figure

There might seem little new to say about John Brown, who fascinated even when he terrified both his contemporaries and historians. Yet, in *The Tie that Bound Us: The Women of John Brown's Family and the Legacy of Radical Abolitionism*, Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz notes that "he is almost always portrayed as occupying an entirely male sphere." (3) When she began investigating the role that Brown's wife, daughters, and daughters-in-law played in his particular brand of antislavery violence, she found herself entering their fragile world, where poverty loomed larger than debates over the tactics of antislavery. Indeed, in the wake of their patriarch's execution, they found themselves more often at odds with abolitionists as they struggled to control both the perceptions of their past and the realities of their future.

The Brown family resembled something akin to a utopian community, rooted in a self-sacrificing Calvinist piety that allowed them to withstand their hard-scrabble rural existence but also demanded that they live a life in active opposition to racism. John Brown headed the extended family as an affectionate, but more often absent, patriarch, and expected all to follow his escalating militancy without question. The extent to which the others bespoke this culture is a constant theme throughout Laughlin-Schultz's work. So, too, is their geographic, class, and ideological isolation from the mainstream – as much as antislavery could be seen as mainstream – abolitionist movement. Scraping out a living in remote reaches of upstate New York, the Brown women could not participate in any of the usual activities of lectures, bazaars, and sewing circles typical of the women who ensured the day-to-day operation of abolition. In later years, class prejudice prevented the decidedly middle class reformers from

sympathizing with the Brown women as fellow activists and grieving mourners rather than objects of charity. At the same time, the Brown brand of militancy was wholly foreign to other abolitionists both in its embrace of violence and in the understanding of women's work. Whereas most antislavery women saw their activism as an extension of their feminine role, the Browns understood the daily grind of household labor as an integral part of their antislavery ethos, interpreting their work in the home not as domestic but as part of the supply and support arm of a guerilla army.

Mary Brown, John's second wife, almost reluctantly committed herself to this mission. His large family and her meager prospects produced a marriage of necessity rather than love, but she seemed to derive her sense of self from her duties, which included adopting John's ideology and supporting his ventures regardless of the cost to herself. Like many other wives, she served as her husband's deputy, overseeing the farm while he battled slavery and representing his devotion to African Americans through her constant presence in the black community of North Elba. She seldom contradicted her husband, although she quietly drew limits on what she would accept, as when she sent her daughter Annie to tend the men preparing for the Harpers Ferry Raid instead of answering her husband's summons for herself. She rebelled only once when her flagging health led her to escape the farm for a water cure. Laughlin-Schulz also questions whether Mary's limited knowledge of many of the details of her husband's actions contributed to her complicity. Mary's devotion, however, seemed closer to grim resignation rather than the sentimentality with which abolitionists attempted to paint her after her husband's arrest. Her ambivalence about his activities appeared too in the commemoration of his life and, as the nineteenth century progressed, her concerns had less to do with extending his racial politics and more with protecting and promoting the needs of her struggling, extended family.

The Brown daughters, on the other hand, embraced the ideologies in which they had been raised, while the daughters-in-law willingly entered the Brown tribe knowing the commitment of membership. Although they accepted the gendered role that they played in support of John Brown's army, they also chafed at its limitations and, perhaps, the feeling of impotence as they sent their husbands, sons, and brothers to face certain death in Kansas and Virginia. Sixteen-year old Annie Brown came closest to breaching the gender gap when she, along with her sister-in-law Martha and in place of her mother, entered the masquerade intended to conceal the preparations for the Harpers Ferry raid. As

tough as her father, Annie internalized the Brown brand of abolition perhaps more than her other siblings or in-laws, but her story also revealed the emotional trauma of survival. Annie appears at turns elated by her participation in momentous events, deeply troubled by the violent loss of her family and comrades, aggravated by the idealization and curiosity of a supposedly sympathetic public, and infuriated by the ways that others appropriated her family's story and erased her from events.

The events at Harpers Ferry thrust the Brown women onto the national stage where they found themselves suddenly supporting characters in an antislavery narrative neither of their own nor of patriarch's making. Abolitionists who once eschewed violence hailed John Brown as a martyr and expected Mary and her daughters to play recognizable parts in a public melodrama. The Brown women went along with some of the charade knowing that they must seize upon public charity in order to survive. Sarah Brown, Annie's younger sister, for instance, was able to attain an education that allowed her to earn a modest living for the rest of her life. Nevertheless, they attempted to set the terms of benevolence, often perplexing and frustrating the purveyors whose zeal to somehow connect themselves with Brown after the fact blinded them to the real women in front of them. So, too, did the Brown women understand their own educational limitations in telling and interpreting their family history. They offered assistance to John Brown's would-be biographers, only to be exploited for documents and memorabilia that were never returned and for which they received no compensation. Often, they themselves were treated as the relics, used to grant legitimacy to publications and commemorative events, but rarely asked to speak or correct stories and forgotten when no longer useful.

Laughlin-Schultz has succeeded in restoring the Brown women's voice to the history of John Brown. She is fortunate enough to have a surprising amount of documentation on them, scattered throughout the United States, but admits that the Browns were guarded in their correspondence. She scoured newspapers and third-party accounts in order to track the Brown's movements and behavior, and their actions become just as much part of the interpretation as their words. Her altogether sympathetic portrait of the Brown family as a whole never glosses over their imperfections, and she brings them to life further through quotations that demonstrate her eye for a particularly tart expression or telling turn of phrase that highlight her subjects' personalities. *The Tie the Bound Us* not only adds a new dimension to John Brown's life, but underscores the class divisions among abolitionists, suggests the ways that women understood their role in

militant antislavery, and is quite a good read.

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