

### To Raise Up a Nation: John Brown, Fredrick Douglass, and the Making of a Free Country

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#### Recommended Citation

Wollard, Andrew (2014) "To Raise Up a Nation: John Brown, Fredrick Douglass, and the Making of a Free Country," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 16 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.4.08

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss4/7>

## Review

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Fall 2014

**King, William S.** *To Raise Up A Nation: John Brown, Fredrick Douglass, and the Making of a Free Country.* Westholme Publishing, \$35.00 ISBN 9781594161919

### The Important Relationship Between John Brown and Frederick Douglass

William S. King's book, *To Raise Up a Nation: John Brown, Frederick Douglass and the Making of a Free Country*, seeks to track the critical relationship between John Brown, Frederick Douglass and their impact on events during and after the Civil War. What is remarkable at first glance, though, is that King is largely unconcerned with the conventional academic approach. Instead of developing a crystal clear argument coupled with a likewise orderly pattern of organization, and presenting a chapter on historiography, King leaps right into his subject by presenting quick takes on David Walker's controversial publication, politics of the 1830s, and on the social and historical context from which both Douglass and Brown emerged. While this approach gets to the heart of the matter quickly, it also has the drawback of potentially limiting King to drawing from only a few sources and on making his sources, including W.E.B. Du Bois and Bruce Catton, somewhat out of date. The approach also inhibits King's ability to organize effectively, either thematically or chronologically.

King has copiously researched his topic and is to be commended for that. He has tracked Brown's relationship with both Douglass and the so-called Secret Six (Gerritt Smith, Theodore Parker, Franklin Sanborn, George Stearns, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Samuel Gridley Howe). King has provided numerous letters between each of the Six, Brown, Brown's sons, and others involved in the Harper's Ferry plot. The trouble, again, has to do with the presentation of information. King has the tendency to name everyone, including one man who simply delivered a telegram and was important in no other way. While the research is thorough and his attention to detail is impressive, by mentioning everyone, including relatively unimportant merchants or deliverymen, King's

book becomes unwieldy and turgid when a more strategic presentation of salient facts would have brought the project to the historical context King is attempting to reconstruct in a clearer way.

King, in discussing the critical importance of John Brown's preparation for the 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry, curiously omits Robert McGlone's *John Brown's War Against Slavery* on the same subject. Ignoring McGlone's book was a mistake, as King appears to disagree sharply about the importance of the so-called Chatham Convention, convening in May 1858, to discuss a constitution stipulating offices for a new slave-free republic of freedmen, and to issue a liberty declaration. King accords the convention great space, devoting nearly ten pages to discussing its importance. McGlone, in contrast, dismisses it largely because it accomplished nothing and served to recruit only one Canadian to Brown's number of troops. King in his turn largely overlooks the importance of the Lysander Spooner manifesto, a work dedicated to the non-slaveholders of the South, imploring them to throw off their chains through insurrection. King cites Brown's contention that theories should come last and "practical ends" come first (282). Yet, McGlone states that Spooner's manifesto should not be so blithely dismissed because it indicated a potential rival for Brown, both socially and historically. Had King better engaged the current scholarship on Brown, he could have given readers an opportunity to see how and why his take on the Chatham convention or on the Spooner manifesto differs from that of other writers.

One particularly troubling feature of King's approach occurs midway through the book (212) when he states the necessity for "carefully cross-referencing" secondary sources or other sources with eyewitness accounts. While this approach seems laudable, it assumes that the eyewitness sources contain no master narrative of their own. Instead of interrogating or inspecting eyewitness accounts, King seems to think that they should be used to monitor the errors of other sources. Indeed, this presents King with an interpretive problem, when he has to balance the words of Frederick Douglass about his role in the plot, versus that of a captured participant. The participant indicates Douglass played a heavier role than Douglass ever admitted to, and King merely accepts that participant's word without inspecting how or why the two men might have different perspectives or viewpoints. This problematic approach appears again in a later in chapter eleven, when King appears content to merely use several master narratives by scholars such as Bruce Catton and James McPherson to summarize the early part of the war. If part of King's work on the war simply

summarizes other secondary sources, perhaps he should either rely on more primary documentation relevant to the war, or skip those sections entirely. Indeed, in a book about the making of a free America and the role of African Americans as soldiers, summarizing the battles of Wilson's Creek and Bull Run may be counterproductive.

King's project, to assess the importance of the relationship between Frederick Douglass and John Brown, and what it presages for the coming war, is impressive. He has tried to produce, compile, and discuss numerous letters, telegrams, newspaper reports, and private interviews in a book that spans many years. The author also attempts to tackle the many individuals, such as Martin Delany and others in the anti-slavery movement, who disagreed as to how to go about attaining, celebrating, and reifying freedom. Yet, at its very core, King has written a Whiggish take on Brown's meteoric symbolism of inevitability and war. King negatively assesses Seward's speech to the Senate on Kansas as a low stoop to the Slave Powers, yet earlier, he ignores Abraham Lincoln doing essentially the same thing in a political speech he gave about the importance of John Brown (294). King assumes that those Republicans not devoted to Brown were stooping to accommodate plantation owners or Northern Democrats. Yet his own example of Lincoln, who quickly repudiated the notion that Harper's Ferry was a natural extension of Republican politics, as charged by some in the Senate and in the press, serves to contradict that assumption. Clearly the situation is more complicated than King presents. The book ends, though, with an engaging rapprochement between Douglass and Brown, Douglass returning home with one blood red brick taken from the engine house at Harper's Ferry and pontificating on the essential difference between Brown's prescription for freedom and Lincoln's proclamation. Had King chosen to limit his scale and scope, and use such powerful metaphors as the one blood red brick to greater effect, this book would have been a more effective examination of the making of a free America.

*Andrew Wollard is an independent scholar with a research interest in grassroots and populist movements. He received his BA from the University of New Mexico and his MFA from the University of Alabama.*