

Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America

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Review

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Carton, Evan *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America*. Free Press, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 9780743271363

The Legend of John Brown

Understanding His Abolitionist Crusade

John Brown is an American philosophical symbol whose life and its effect on American history have been the source of debate since he began his abolitionist crusade in Kansas Territory in 1855. Brown was a burning match in the tinderbox of Territorial Kansas, where conflict over the issue of slavery exploded into guerilla warfare. The fighting in Kansas intensified national tensions over slavery, and Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, on October 16, 1859, helped to spark the Civil War.

Evan Carton enters the fray over the moral rectitude of Brown's abolitionist crusade, arguing that Brown's resistance to the federal government was morally justified. Carton asserts that Americans are at their most patriotic when they resist injustice, whether that injustice is perpetrated by the federal government or by American society. Furthermore, he asserts that historical figures like Brown, who battle legalized injustice, are positive agents of change.

Carton, an English professor and the director of the Humanities Institute at the University of Texas at Austin, is the author of *The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickenson, Poe, and Hawthorne* and *The Marble Faun: Hawthorne's Transformations*. For *Patriotic Treason*, he performed in-depth research and provides an analysis that reflects his study of the philosophical motivations behind the actions of literary characters. He studies Brown's beliefs well and clearly explains his interpretation of Brown's role in history.

The works about Brown range from panegyrics such as F.B. Sanborn's *The Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia* (1891) to moderate views of Brown such as Stephen Oates's *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (1971) to negative interpretations of Brown such as Hill Peebles Wilson's *John Brown, Soldier of Fortune* (1913). Carton's work portrays Brown as a flawed hero, an imperfect man who was willing to fight and die for the abolitionist cause. Accordingly, his work falls into the moderate camp in the intellectual battle over John Brown.

Carton accurately establishes Brown's role in creating ideological conflict and violence between pro- and anti-slavery forces in Kansas Territory. Brown came to Kansas Territory to fight, not farm, and his contribution to Bleeding Kansas was to create dissension. Carton paints a vivid picture of Brown's guerilla warfare, making the work an interesting read. While exploring Brown's abolitionist beliefs, Carton exhibits his talent as a writer. The Brown in *Patriotic Treason* is a fierce but principled abolitionist warrior, ranging about Kansas Territory battling proslavery guerillas and constantly opposing any compromise with proslavery forces.

Brown's intransigence toward slavery is the central theme of this work, and Carton celebrates it throughout his book. Many Americans deride Brown's commitment to the abolitionist cause as fanaticism, but Carton trumpets Brown's determined effort to end slavery as a cornerstone of American liberty. He accurately establishes that Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, though a military failure, was an ideological victory. Carton forcefully establishes that the raid fired up discussion of the slavery issue and forced more Northerners and Southerners to take a stand on the slavery issue, creating a philosophical argument that soon ceased to be verbal and was played out on the battlefields of the Civil War.

Carton does not break any new ground in this work, for his argument is not new. W.E.B. DuBois's 1909 biography *John Brown* set forth the same thesis and served as a call to action for African-Americans to fight for their civil rights. DuBois trumpeted John Brown as an example for African-Americans to follow in their struggle for equality in American society. Nevertheless, readers will find a great deal of information about John Brown in this well-researched work. Additionally, Carton issues a call to action to readers to resist injustice in American society. The author frames Brown's violence against proslavery advocates in Kansas and his Harpers Ferry raid as morally acceptable given the

injustice of slavery. Carton exhibits Brown's guerilla warfare as a necessary response to proslavery aggression in Kansas Territory. In addition, he interprets the fighting at Harpers Ferry as a regretful but necessary wakeup call for a nation trying to compromise on the slavery issue.

John Brown was executed on December 2, 1859, for his raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia. However, as a philosophical symbol, he still lives in the constant debate over the moral righteousness of civil disobedience and violent resistance in response to legalized injustice. Evan Carton offers an excellent work that is based on sound historical research and accurately demonstrates Brown's ideological motivation to embark on his abolitionist crusade. The book also stands as an ideological treatise; as much a call to action against injustice in the present day as it is about the past. He races past the boundary of establishing historical fact and motivation. Carton utilizes Brown's fealty to his abolitionist beliefs and his willingness to fight and die for his cause as a call for present day Americans to resist injustice. John Brown would certainly agree.

Grady Atwater is the site curator of the John Brown Museum State Historic Site in Osawatomie, Kansas.