

John Brown's War Against Slavery

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Review

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McGlone, Robert E. *John Brown's War against Slavery*. Cambridge University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9780521514439

A Fresh Reflection on John Brown's Ideological Origins

John Brown's militant abolitionist crusade changed American history. His actions during the guerilla war in Kansas Territory from 1855 to 1858 sparked both violence in Kansas Territory and Missouri and philosophical debate across the nation. Brown escalated the debate over slavery to the point that it sparked the Civil War via his raid on Harpers Ferry on October 16, 1859. Brown's contemporaries and historians have been debating his motivations to take up arms against proslavery forces since he unsheathed his sword against slavery in Kansas Territory.

Robert McGlone joins the battle over John Brown's motivations to utilize violence to end slavery in *John Brown's War against Slavery*, in which he asserts that John Brown was motivated by a combination of secular philosophical influences and his religious beliefs to engage in his peaceful abolitionist crusade until he moved to Kansas Territory in 1855. In addition, he argues that John Brown worked within the framework of his family to combat slavery. Furthermore, McGlone argues that John Brown was turned to violence by the guerilla war in Kansas Territory, and became a militant abolitionist.

Robert McGlone's work is well-researched and he writes in a stimulating academic style that reflects an effective understanding of the historiography of John Brown scholarship. Readers will have to do prerequisite reading of a chronological biography about John Brown to be able to appreciate McGlone's work. His study is almost pure analysis, which requires preliminary knowledge in order to comprehend McGlone's in-depth analysis of John Brown's motivations.

The traditional assessment of John Brown's motives is that he was moved by his Calvinist Christian religious beliefs to begin his abolitionist crusade. His violence was a product of the belief that he was God's agent on earth, and he was called by God to fight slavery. He did so largely on his own, eschewing family, friends, and supporters' advice to moderate his abolitionist campaign, and thus committed violence in the prosecution of his militant efforts to combat proslavery forces. Virtually every contemporary and historian interprets Brown's motives in this religious light, from Richard Hinton's *John Brown and His Men* (1894) to Evan Carton's *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* (2006). Brown scholars typically utilize the same body of evidence, a collection of observations by Brown's contemporaries and letters from John Brown's era to prove their arguments. Brown's contemporaries and historians utilize these sources to the point that most works about John Brown are so predictable that it is possible that the reader can successfully prognosticate where the author is going from the first chapter of each work.

McGlone breaks new ground in this work, for he utilizes sources that John Brown scholars typically brush aside, John Brown's family and John Brown's own letters and writings. John Brown scholars have normally dismissed these sources as suspect, but McGlone rejects that assessment. For in searching out John Brown's personal motivations, John Brown's own words offer shades of meaning not found in observations and reminisces of John Brown's supporters, written later in life. McGlone successfully proves that John Brown's own writings are effective evidence concerning his motivations, and uses Brown's own words to paint a picture of a man who was motivated by both secular philosophies and his religious beliefs.

John Brown's family's abolitionism was motivated by Owen Brown's Calvinist Christianity. McGlone makes a valiant effort to prove that Owen Brown was equally motivated by secular philosophy to engage in his abolitionist crusade. He confirms the traditional assessment that John Brown was motivated by his religious beliefs, for a thorough reading of John Brown's letters reveals a deeply religious man who liberally quoted scripture to justify his actions. Therefore, he does not prove this part of his thesis.

McGlone also breathes fresh air into the debate over Brown's motivations by successfully proving that Brown was very much motivated by close family ties. McGlone disproves that John Brown was the stubborn loner who eschewed all family advice and support when it did not agree with his plans. Instead, he

proves that John Brown worked with his family in his abolitionist crusade, and sought their approval of his actions. McGlone's John Brown is very much a family man, whose heart aches when his family suffers, and feels guilt and sadness when his family suffers because of his abolitionist crusade.

McGlone effectively argues that the traditional image of John Brown as an ideological loner, who acted despite contrary advice from his family, is an erroneous conclusion. He presents an accurate picture of John Brown as a man working within the framework of a dedicated abolitionist family. Moreover, instead of eschewing his families' advice, he sought their counsel, and worked to gain their approval for his actions. McGlone adds a new facet to the historical interpretation of Brown's motivations by proving that John Brown had close family ties and worked within the framework of his family circle.

McGlone also diverts from the traditional argument that John Brown became a militant abolitionist in the late 1830's. He asserts that John Brown's militancy came to fore during the guerilla war in Kansas Territory from 1855 to 1858. He dismisses reminiscences from Brown's associates who assert that John Brown had become a militant abolitionist before he came to Kansas Territory as hearsay, tainted by age and hidden agendas.

The traditional assertion that John Brown's militant abolitionist crusade began to be formed in the late 1830's and that it came to fruition in Kansas Territory is well documented by the historical record. Following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, Brown organized the United States League of Gileadites, and armed African-Americans with knives and other weapons to defend themselves against slave hunters. Brown's contemporaries and historians have been correct in their argument that Brown gradually grew to become the militant abolitionist that stoked the fires of conflict over slavery in Kansas Territory over a long period of time. McGlone does not prove this aspect of his thesis, for he overlooks the evidence that proves that John Brown's militant abolitionist crusade had its genesis in the 1830's and grew gradually until it came to fruition in Kansas Territory and at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

Robert E. McGlone has written an excellent book that shines new light on John Brown's motivations to engage in his abolitionist crusade. He brings to light new evidence that challenges the traditional view of Brown's motivations and also confirms traditional theories about John Brown's motivations for his militant abolitionist crusade. This is a groundbreaking work that historians

should read, for McGlone offers new insights into Brown that further prove that John Brown was a complex individual who changed American history, and defies easy conclusions about his motivations for his militant abolitionist crusade.

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