

Introduction

Paul Finkelman

Madman, monster, murderer, terrorist, fanatic! Humanitarian, civil rights hero, rescuer of slaves, martyr to human freedom! Over two centuries after John Brown's birth and almost a century and a half after his death, his legend and legacy go marching on. His memory haunts us, troubles us, and always fascinates us. Was he a martyr or a madman, a monster or a humanitarian? Was he a liberator of slaves or a terrorist murdering innocent civilians? However we think of him, John Brown remains one of the most controversial and complex figures in America's history. He is iconic and powerful.

Brown is most remembered for his actions at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and for his execution in December 1859. In Kansas he participated in the mini-civil war known as Bleeding Kansas and directed his men as they killed a group of Southern settlers and proslavery sympathizers at Pottawatomie Creek. At Harpers Ferry he seized a federal armory and fought a day-and-a-half battle with local militia and U.S. Marines, before finally being captured. He was then tried for treason against Virginia—a crime he surely had never committed. Since he was never a citizen of Virginia, he could hardly have committed treason against the state. But he was nevertheless convicted and hanged. His hanging secured his martyrdom in the North. Moreover, his stoic and brave demeanor, throughout the last month of his life, including the day of his death, impressed even his enemies. Virginia's governor, Henry Wise, found Brown "cool, collected and indomitable."¹ He was, said Wise, "the gamest man [I] ever saw."²

Brave, committed, and unalterably opposed to slavery. But also violent. He killed men—or ordered them killed—in Kansas. His actions in Harpers Ferry led to the deaths of others. He stoically faced pain and death and expected others to do the same. While his son lay dying in the engine house at Harpers Ferry, Brown urged him to act, and die, like a man.

How then do we understand Brown? At one level, his life is one of total failure. Everything he did seems to have been a failure. Until Kansas he was

an unknown, small-time abolitionist. He was a failure in business. He had visions of commercial success, which always ended in failure. No one, not even his enemies, thought he was dishonest, but his incompetence and his lack of discipline meant that he often abused the trust others placed in him. His early legacy was bankruptcy and financial chaos. Before Kansas he lived his life in obscurity, preaching against slavery and in favor of racial justice, often only a step ahead of his creditors and just as often on the verge of economic catastrophe. His move to Kansas did not change his fortunes but did give him fame. The events at Pottawatomie thrust him into the limelight, even as he denied any part in the killings. His warfare in Kansas may have helped keep that place a free territory, but it is unlikely that Congress would have allowed Kansas to enter the Union as a slave state in any event.

His raid at Harpers Ferry was also a failure. He did not start a slave rebellion; most of his “soldiers” were killed or captured, and he too was wounded and captured. His raid probably had little effect on the presidential election of 1860. All the candidates denounced his violence and illegal actions. He may have helped Lincoln a little by making the Republicans look more moderate on the slavery issue, but he also surely scared some moderate slaveholders into voting for the Southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge and some moderate Northerners into supporting the Democratic candidate from their region, Stephen A. Douglas, or even the Constitutional Union ticket of Senator John Bell and Edward Everett. He is remembered as a major catalyst for the American Civil War, although surely the war would have come whether he raided Harpers Ferry or not.

Yet for all his failures, he is remembered—and remembered correctly—as an icon of the antebellum crisis and a harbinger of the violence and death that was soon to sweep over the nation. He accomplished nothing and caused nothing, and yet, in some way, he accomplished a great deal and moved the nation dramatically closer to civil war. Indeed, it was in his death and his martyrdom that he accomplished so much and gave his life meaning. But what do we make of this meaning? How do we understand and evaluate his life?

His actions are seldom viewed neutrally; they either evoke commendation or provoke condemnation. Because of such ongoing controversy, scholars in various disciplines share a desire to analyze and interpret Brown’s legacy. His legacy is even more compelling in our own age, because some people see Brown as a prototype of a modern terrorist, striking fear and hoping to achieve political change through violence. But Brown is an odd model for the

modern terrorist. Brown's violence was never random—he was not like Timothy McVeigh or the Muslim fanatics who demolished the World Trade Center. His violence was always focused. Those killed at Pottawatomie were, for the most part, combatants in a ruthless civil war. One of the men killed had threatened to kill Brown and his sons and other Free State settlers. All those killed were allied with slavery in the fight over the status of freedom in Kansas. Similarly, at Harpers Ferry, Brown's goal was not death or mayhem; it was to lead slaves to freedom. Brown's final statement in his life, given to his jailer just before he was led away to die, reveals his goals: "I John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crimes of this *guilty land*: will never be purged away; but with Blood. I had as *I now think*; vainly flattered myself that without *very much* bloodshed: it might be done" (emphasis Brown's).³ Had Brown wanted destruction, he could certainly have accomplished it. He controlled an armory full of weapons and powder. He might easily have blown up much of the town or slaughtered civilians in their sleep. He did not, because it was freedom for slaves, and not the death of slave owners, that he sought.

If not a terrorist specializing in random terror, was Brown the precursor of the antichoice fanatic who bombs women's health clinics? Some of those who have murdered in the name of saving the lives of the "unborn" have invoked Brown's memory. They argue that just as Brown killed proslavery men in Kansas who threatened Free Staters, so the antichoice avenging angels plant bombs at women's clinics or kill doctors and others who work there. But this analogy quickly falls apart.

Brown lived at a time when the political process and democratic values had been undermined, or destroyed, by slavery. In Kansas the sword and the gun, not the ballot and the printing press, had become the method of determining what kind of government the territory and future state would have. Violence and fraudulent elections were the rule. A war was in progress, and one can view Pottawatomie as a tragic event in a tragic war. But even here Brown is clearly not a terrorist; he killed only soldiers or potential soldiers for the enemy at Pottawatomie, and he did not kill children or women, nor did he destroy buildings or other property. He killed those who threatened to kill him. This after all, is what warfare is about.

The modern analogy to antichoice terrorists or the Timothy McVeighs of the world falls apart on another level. In the modern United States, the freedoms of speech, press, and assembly allow for peaceful discussion of all public issues and provide forums to persuade voters and legislators. The political

process is open, and change through democratic means is possible. But by the 1850s democracy in America was in crisis. In the South there was no discourse on slavery. No debate was tolerated, and agitation against slavery was illegal. Thus there was no possibility for internal change in the South. The Constitution did not allow the national government to interfere with slavery in the states. Thus there was no political process that could end slavery or even challenge it where it existed. In Kansas there was an open political process, but violence, intimidation, and vote fraud undermined the legitimacy of any elections. For Brown, revolution was the only way to significantly challenge slavery. Thus some modern Americans see Brown as a hero of civil rights, challenging slavery in a nation where a proslavery constitution made political change impossible.

Brown continues to fascinate us. We have paintings of him as a heroic figure and a gentle saint. One of the early likenesses of Brown shows him on the way to the gallows, gently and lovingly kissing a black child (see plate 7 for a similar image). In the 1940 film *Santa Fe Trail*, Brown appears as an Old Testament prophet, even as the film tries to turn him into a bloodthirsty villain. In the end, the power of Brown's legacy overcame the screenplay. Similarly, while remembered in Kansas for the killings at Pottawatomie, Brown is portrayed in heroic style on the walls of the state capitol (plate 13). Brown attacked a federal armory, destroyed federal property, and was captured by federal troops. But a heroic Brown leads slaves to freedom in the John Brown mural in the U.S. post office in Torrington, Connecticut (plate 12). In 2000 the National Park Service held a two-day symposium to study—and honor—the legacy of John Brown at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.

In this volume twelve scholars—representing history, literature, creative writing, psychology, criminal justice, oral history, African American studies, political science, film studies, and anthropology—offer insights through the prisms of their own disciplines to give new interpretations and understandings of Brown's life and the personal, psychological, and social forces driving him. These scholars also place Brown, as both an individual and an “icon,” in the context of the collapse of the American Union in 1861. The essays include discussions of Brown's contemporaries and their reasons for supporting him, attempts to define Brown using different criteria, analyses of Brown's behavior and psychology, literary portrayals of Brown, and examinations of the iconography surrounding Brown. None of us agree wholly on how to interpret Brown or how to evaluate him.

When all is said and done, I side with those who see him as a hero of civil rights and a tireless advocate of racial equality. At a time when many whites, even some abolitionists, were uncomfortable in the presence of blacks, John Brown shared his meals with them and recruited them as soldiers in his army of liberation. While many antebellum whites doubted the equality of blacks or their innate abilities, Brown was willing to stake his life on the abilities of his black recruits to take orders, execute commands, and fight bravely. As the American nation spiraled toward civil war, Brown helped prepare the North for the coming conflict. He understood that in times of crisis, self-sacrifice is essential. While other opponents of slavery talked about how bad the system was, Brown ventured into Missouri and helped a score of slaves escape to Canada.

Brown as a hero also underscores the limits of heroism. He was not a saint. He was not a dishonest businessman but was so negligent and sloppy that his economic ventures failed, and his behavior was almost criminal. He lied about his business affairs and about his political and revolutionary intentions. He kept records of correspondence with his backers that, for their safety and his, he should have destroyed. He was charismatic and mesmerizing but was also hard and almost cruel to his children and to those who disappointed him. He was a hero of civil rights and freedom but was perhaps not someone to trust or even someone who was very likeable. One might love or admire Brown, but one would not want him as a role model.

He was in the end an enormously passionate, complex, and compelling figure. He was larger than life while alive, and larger still when dead. He saw himself as a Christlike martyr and fully understood the value of both his life and his death. Before he was sentenced, he told the Virginia court: “Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, —I submit; so let it be done!”⁴ While in jail, Brown wrote hundreds of letters, building an image of martyrdom. His friends wanted to rescue him from jail or try to get him released on an insanity defense, but he would have none of it. He assured his brother, “I am worth inconceivably more to *hang* than for any other purpose.”⁵ And so he was.

Had he died in jail or been placed in an institution, he would be but a footnote to the struggle against slavery and the collapse of the United States on

the eve of the Civil War. But dead on the gallows, surrounded by hundreds of Virginia soldiers protecting his execution from an abolitionist rescue, he was a martyr to freedom and the embodiment of all that the powers that upheld slavery feared. As poet Stephen Vincent Benét put it:

He had no gift for life, no gift to bring
Life but his body and a cutting edge,
But he knew how to die.⁶

From his death came his martyrdom and our endless fascination with his life.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," in *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1993), 42.
2. *Ibid.*, 36.
3. John Brown, "A prophetic note written by Brown on the day of his execution predicting the establishment of abolition through bloodshed," John Brown Papers, Chicago Historical Society.
4. John Brown, *Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia*, ed. F. B. Sanborn (1885; repr., New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 585.
5. Quoted in Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown*, 2nd ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 335.
6. Stephen Vincent Benét, *John Brown's Body* (1928; repr., New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 48.