John Brown: Villain or Hero?

by Steven Mintz

In 1856, three years before his celebrated raid on Harpers Ferry, John Brown, with four of his sons and three others, dragged five unarmed men and boys from their homes along Kansas’s Pottawatomie Creek and hacked and dismembered their bodies as if they were cattle being butchered in a stockyard. Two years later, Brown led a raid into Missouri, where he and his followers killed a planter and freed eleven slaves. Brown’s party also absconded with wagons, mules, harnesses, and horses—a pattern of plunder that Brown followed in other forays. During his 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, seventeen people died. The first was a black railroad baggage handler; others shot and killed by Brown’s men included the town’s popular mayor and two townsfolk.

In the wake of Timothy McVeigh’s attack on the federal office building in Oklahoma City in 1995 and al Qaeda’s strikes on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001, Americans might ask how they should remember John Brown. Was he a bloodthirsty zealot, a vigilante, a terrorist, or a madman? Or was he one of the great heroes of American history, a freedom fighter and martyr to the cause of human liberty? Was his resort to violence any different from, for example, those by Paul Hill and John Salví, who, in the mid-1990s, murdered abortion-clinic workers in God’s name?

Nearly a century and a half after his execution, John Brown remains one of the most fiercely debated and enigmatic figures in American history. Brown’s earliest biographers—especially James Redpath, Franklin Sanborn, and Oswald Garrison Villard—were hero-worshippers who considered Brown a warrior-saint whose assaults on slavery represented the first crucial steps toward emancipation. During the 1930s and early 1940s, a more critical view arose. At a time when revisionists regarded the Civil War as a needless conflict fomented by fanatics and blundering politicians, many scholars followed the lead of James C. Malin, who argued that Brown was little more than an indiscriminate
murderer, swindler, and petty horse thief, who had little genuine interest in anti-slavery or in the rights of African Americans. Following World War II, many leading historians dismissed Brown as clinically delusional—Bruce Catton called him “unbalanced to the verge of outright madness”—and denounced his attack on Harpers Ferry as an act of treason. A notable dissent was the Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker, who argued that Brown’s rage against slavery grew out of his fury over market capitalism, which had reduced his family to poverty. In the 1960s a new generation of scholars viewed Brown as an uncompromising idealist, a principled agitator, and a genuine revolutionary who envisioned an America free of racial prejudice.

Since 1970, Brown has been the subject of at least forty-three biographies, scholarly studies, and works of fiction (as well as eighteen children’s books), including a best-selling novel (Russell Banks’s Cloudsplitter), a brilliant collection of annotated primary sources (Zoe Trodd and John Stauffer’s Meteor of War), an extended analysis of his religious beliefs (Louis A. DeCaro Jr.’s Fire from the Midst of You), and two studies of his legacy and place in American memory (Merrill Peterson’s John Brown: The Legend Revisited and Peggy A. Russo and Paul Finkelman’s Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown). Far more objective and much freer of the venom and over-romanticizing that marred earlier scholarship, these works do an impressive job of separating the man from the myth and locating Brown in the context of his times.

David S. Reynolds’s John Brown, Abolitionist, the first full-length biography in a generation, provides essential background for the critical issues raised by John Brown’s life. A “cultural biography,” which seeks to show how Brown’s life reflected, shaped, and ultimately transcended his age, the book is aimed at a popular as well as a scholarly audience and advances two overarching arguments: First, at a time when white supremacy was the norm, Brown was one of a handful of white Americans who could interact with black Americans on a level of true intimacy and equality. Second, although some of Brown’s acts strike present-day observers as barbaric, these acts of violence were “ultimately noble,” because they were necessary to promote the cause of human liberty. The strengths of Reynolds’s book include its wealth of detail, its skillful synthesis of recent scholarship, and its fascinating digressions into such subjects as the Transcendentalists’ attitude toward violence and New Englanders’ shifting views of Oliver Cromwell. The book is less successful in explicating Brown’s religious beliefs, his personal psychology, the ambiguities of his relations with African Americans, and the links between his raid and the coming of the Civil War.

Born in rural Connecticut in 1800 to a deeply religious family, Brown grew up in northeastern Ohio’s staunchly anti-slavery Western Reserve. He had little formal education and his personal life was filled with misfortune. He lost his mother when he was eight and his first wife died in childbirth. Of his twenty offspring, only eleven survived childhood. His business life was marked by failure. He experienced many of the vicissitudes of America’s emerging market economy, working as a surveyor, tanner, farmer, shepherd, cattle merchant, horse trader, land speculator, and wool broker. He experienced at least fifteen business failures, and was the target of at least twenty-one lawsuits—losing ten—and in at least one instance, he misappropriated funds. It was not until 1855, when he was in his mid-fifties, that Brown became a central figure in the anti-slavery cause.

Among the key issues raised by Brown’s life is why he alone among leading northern abolitionists chose violence as the way to end slavery. The answer lies in Brown’s intense religiosity, which was rooted in the “New Divinity” of rural New England, a religion harshly critical of materialism, commercialism, and the relentless pursuit of profit. To many proponents of the New Divinity, slavery epitomized society’s obsession with untrammeled self-interest. Brown’s religious upbringing not only taught him to hate slavery, it also contributed to his moral absolutism, his messianic self-image, and his embrace of the example of the Old Testament prophets and of an earlier warrior for the Lord, Oliver Cromwell, who led the overthrow of the English monarchy during the English Civil War. The biblical passage that best summed up Brown’s religious ideas is “without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin” (Hebrews 9:22).
Another fundamental issue that Brown’s life presents is his commitment to racial equality. Brown hated slavery from an early age and by his twenties had helped at least one fugitive along the Underground Railroad. During the 1830s, he considered various ways of helping African Americans, including establishing a school, and in the 1840s, he came into close contact with Frederick Douglass and moved to the Adirondacks to assist a colony of free black farmers who had received land from the wealthy abolitionist Gerrit Smith. In 1851, he responded to the Fugitive Slave Law by organizing, in Springfield, Massachusetts, “The League of Gileadites,” a group formed to resist slave catchers and assist runaways to escape to Canada.

There is no doubt that Brown achieved a degree of intimacy with African Americans that was extraordinarily rare for his era. Douglass later described Brown as the only white person he knew without racial prejudice. Yet it remains unclear if Brown was the true racial egalitarian that Reynolds claims he was. A “self-appointed savior” (in David Potter’s sardonic phrase), Brown took virtually no advice from African Americans (with the notable exception of Douglass) and named no blacks to serve as lieutenants when he launched his raid on Harpers Ferry. In fact, the paternalism of his age runs through Brown’s relations with blacks.

It was not until the mid-1850s that Brown committed himself to overthrowing slavery by force. What were the factors that transformed Brown, already in his fifties, into an uncompromising agitator for slavery’s abolition? The answer lies in the convergence of personal and political factors, including a series of personal misfortunes, frustrations, and tragedies that culminated in the early 1850s. In the early 1840s, Brown was declared bankrupt, evicted from his farm, and lost four children to dysentery in a single month. Later in the 1840s and the early 1850s, his troubles continued. Brown was separated from his family for prolonged periods of time, he lost another child (the result of scalding), several sons abandoned their religious faith, and bitter litigation swirled around his business ventures. Meanwhile, the political crisis over slavery intensified as a result of the Mexican-American War, enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law, and passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. After a prolonged period of vacillation, Brown decided to forsake the material world, largely abandoning his farm, his business ventures, and even his wife. He joined several of his sons in Kansas and dedicated his remaining years to slavery’s overthrow.

How in today’s age of terrorist violence committed in the name of God should we evaluate Brown’s actions? The massacre at Pottawatomie Creek presents the greatest challenge for Brown’s sympathizers. Arguing that Brown’s actions were explicable, if not defensible, Reynolds contends that the murders were designed to terrify the pro-slavery forces and make it clear that anti-slavery Kansas would not remain passive in the face of insults and threats. By placing the killings in the context of their times—which witnessed the murders of five anti-slavery Kansans; the burning and pillaging of Lawrence, Kansas, by “border ruffians” from Missouri; and the caning of Senator Charles Sumner in the US Capitol—Reynolds seeks to diminish Brown’s guilt.

There can be no doubt that mob violence was common in the mid-1850s, and not only in Kansas. Reynolds might well have situated the violence in Kansas in an even broader context. Election-day riots in 1854 left eight dead in Baltimore and ten dead in St. Louis; twenty reportedly died in an 1855 riot in Louisville; and the 1857 Mountain Meadows massacre in southern Utah resulted in the killing of approximately 120 members of a wagon train by a Mormon militia and Paiute Indians. Yet while it is helpful to contextualize the Pottawatomie Creek killings, Reynolds should have made it clear that the massacre and the mutilation of the corpses certainly worsened the situation in “Bleeding Kansas,” igniting the conflict’s most violent phase, which ultimately left about fifty-five settlers dead. Perhaps the most significant question raised by Brown’s life involves the impact of his Harpers Ferry raid on the coming of the Civil War. Here it is essential to distinguish between the raid itself and the way it was interpreted. The raid itself was poorly planned and executed. Brown succeeded in attracting only twenty-one followers, far fewer than the fifty or one hundred he had hoped for. He made no effort to communicate with slaves in the Harpers Ferry area before the raid. He and his
men carried no provisions when they attacked the federal arsenal. Brown failed to destroy a stash of documents incriminating his supporters. In the end, his indecisiveness and procrastination during the raid resulted in the deaths of ten of his supporters and the capture and hanging of six others. Had Brown died in the attack, he might well have been dismissed as an incompetent fanatic.

At first, Brown was widely denounced in the North as a murderer, criminal, and madman, leading conservative unionists to feel confident that his actions would unite the nation against extremists, South and North. But during the forty-five days between his capture and execution, he was transformed, in the eyes of thousands of northerners, from a brutal terrorist into a prophet and avenging angel. The deification of Brown as a heroic martyr outraged many white southerners, who felt that Brown expressed the North’s secret will: to foment race war in the South.

Brown himself played a crucial role in reshaping his public image. His calm demeanor and fierce commitment to the anti-slavery cause persuaded many that he was a Christ-like martyr, not a murderer or traitor. He was helped by abolitionists (who believed that his execution would do more for the anti-slavery cause than his acquittal or rescue), editorialists, eulogists, and speechmakers, as well as members of the clergy like the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, and poets and writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Even Abraham Lincoln, who condemned Brown for committing “violence, bloodshed, and treason,” also applauded the old man’s motives and lauded his “great courage” and “rare unselfishness.” Meanwhile, southern fire-eaters insisted that Brown’s raid was rooted in the Republican Party’s rhetoric about a “higher law” and an “irrepressible conflict.” This argument was so successful that the Republican Party wrote off the South during the 1860 election.

Was Brown mentally ill? In a bid to spare their client from the gallows, Brown’s attorneys gathered nineteen affidavits testifying to insanity in Brown’s immediate family. Certainly not, says Reynolds. In fact, the real-life Brown was considered enigmatic by many who knew him personally. He could be stubborn, selfish, cold, arbitrary, intolerant, and vindictive. Yet he could also be loving, compassionate, and tender-hearted. There is also no doubt that he exhibited certain signs of mental abnormality, including sudden mood swings, an inflated notion of his military skills, and, above all, an obsessive fury over the institution of slavery. Of course, at a time when many Americans accepted slavery as an inevitable part of the social order, a degree of mental abnormality may have been necessary to recognize slavery’s evil.

John Brown’s prophetic truth was that slavery could not be purged from America except with blood. In a 1949 essay, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. rejected the notion that the Civil War was a “repressible conflict” caused by fanatics and blundering politicians. Writing in the wake of World War II, he argued that there are times when a society works itself “into a logjam; and that logjam must be burst by violence.” By the mid-1850s, it was apparent that moral suasion and political institutions had failed to place slavery on the road to extinction. The nation had reached an increasingly violent impasse. Anti-slavery crowds sought to prevent slave catchers from transporting fugitives back to the South. “Bleeding Kansas” had revealed that popular sovereignty offered an illusory solution to the problem of slavery in the western territories. The Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision eliminated possible compromise solutions to the westward expansion of slavery. Ultimately, slavery could only be ended by force of arms.

Steven Mintz, a historian at Columbia University and director of the Columbia Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Teaching Center, would like to express his profound debt to John Staufffer of Harvard University for sharing his many insights into the novel. Mintz is author of Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood, Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life (2004); and Moralists & Modernizers: America’s Pre-Civil War Reformers (1995).