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An authoritative new examination of John Brown and his deep impact on American history. Bancroft Prize-winning cultural historian David S. Reynolds presents an informative and richly considered new exploration of the paradox of a man steeped in the Bible but more than willing to kill for his abolitionist cause. Reynolds locates Brown within the currents of nineteenth-century life and compares him to modern terrorists, civil-rights activists, and freedom fighters. Ultimately, he finds neither a wild-eyed fanatic nor a Christ-like martyr, but a passionate opponent of racism so dedicated to eradicating slavery that he realized only blood could scour it from the country he loved. By stiffening the backbone of Northerners and showing Southerners there were those who would fight for their cause, he hastened the coming of the Civil War. This is a vivid and startling story of a man and an age on the verge of calamity.

John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights Details

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From Reader Review John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights for online ebook

Shauna says

John Brown was unique.

A "cultural biography," this book places John Brown within the context of the society he was living in at the time. Through that lens, we see just how much he differed from his contemporaries. He wasn't just a free-stater, wanting to stop the spread of slavery. And he wasn't just an abolitionist, wanting to eradicate slavery where it currently existed. Unlike both groups, John Brown believed in racial equality. While most abolitionists of his day believed blacks were inferior to whites and as such should be kept separate from them, John Brown believed that all people, regardless of race--and sex, for he was also a feminist--were equal. He wanted a fully integrated society. When he attended church with black friends and saw that they had to sit in the back, he gave them his pew in the front and took the back pew for himself--and continued to do so every week, much to the outrage of the church officials. Strange to think that he was doing this in 1836, some 120+ years before the civil rights movement.

He dedicated his life to abolitionist activities, and the Harper's Ferry raid was but one of them. He should also be remembered for his work on the Underground Railroad, and for his act of freeing eleven slaves and escorting them 1,100 miles north to freedom on an eight-month journey. He was not violent for the sake of violence; he just believed it was the only way to end slavery (which, as the Civil War proved, it was).

It is also interesting to learn just how much the Transcendentalists supported him. Transcendentalists have been criticized for having their head in the clouds throughout the tumultuous pre-Civil War era, but that's not the case. The Secret Six who funded John Brown's raid all had connections to the transcendentalist circle that Emerson, Thoreau, and others were part of. Furthermore, two weeks after the Harper's Ferry raid, when even antislavery activists were denouncing John Brown, Henry David Thoreau was the first to express admiration for him in his speech "A Plea for Captain John Brown." Emerson and others would soon follow in this regard.

This book shows that, controversial though John Brown may have been, there was a lot to admire. It's no wonder that black activists like Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. du Bois, Harriet Tubman, and Malcolm X, praised him in ways that they would not praise other white people. As his friend Frederick Douglass said, "His zeal in the cause of my race was far greater than mine."

Theo Logos says

John Brown is an American enigma. His life presents a serious challenge to a simple black and white interpretation of ethics, history, and by extrapolation, even current events. He was a man a hundred years ahead of his time in racial ethics - not only opposed to slavery, but unlike almost all other abolitionist of his time, actually a believer in the equality of the races. He was praised honestly by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote of him that he "believed in two articles - the golden rule and the Declaration of Independence." Another contemporary, the black reformer Charles H. Langston praised him saying, "he was a lover of

mankind - not of any particular class or color, but of all men...he fully, really and actively believed in the equality and brotherhood of man. ...He is the only American citizen who has lived fully up to the Declaration of Independence." Yet this man who was so dedicated to racial justice was able to direct the cold blooded murders of five pro-slavery men in Kansas who he had ripped from their families in the middle of the night and hacked to death with broadswords without any qualms or regrets. He chillingly stated that "it is better that a whole generation of men, women, and children should be swept away than that this crime of slavery should exist one day longer." Brown's life presents an open question on what if any limits should stand in the way of those attempting to right great societal wrongs and bring about justice. David Reynolds biography may not fully answer that question, but it goes a long way toward putting it into a proper perspective.

Reynolds' biography of Brown is both detailed and fascinating, and is sympathetic without attempting to hide the dark and troubling aspects of Brown's actions. He delves deeply into Brown's Puritan heritage and just what that meant to his life and actions. He makes clear what a unique individual Brown was. While most of the famous abolitionist who were his contemporaries never questioned the basic racism of their time despite their opposition to slavery, Brown believed firmly in racial equality. Black men and women dined with his family, and he worked intimately with them, giving them real positions of authority in the endeavors that he organized - actions unique for his time. Reynolds also explores the fact that Brown was in favor of equal rights for women and humane treatment of American Indians. He notes that while he was a fervently committed Calvinist Christian, he worked closely with others who did not share his faith, including Jews and agnostics. He shows us a man who was not a typical fanatic, but a man who believed fanatically in one basic principle - the literal interpretation of the Declaration of Independence and the Golden Rule. Reynolds also puts Brown's most troubling violence, the murders at Pottawatomie, Kansas, back into the historical context in which they happened. He writes, "Pottawatomie, gruesome and vile as it was, was John Brown's impulsive response to equally vile crimes committed by the proslavery side."

Beyond all of this, Reynolds explores in some depth the importance that the Transcendentalists had in securing John Brown's place in American history. He points out that had not Thoreau and afterwards Emerson come to Brown's public defense, Brown very well could have been forgotten by history - viewed as just one more aberrant crank with misguided and wild schemes. He spends more than one hundred pages exploring the effect Brown's actions, capture, and death had on both his contemporaries and on posterity, showing the immediate impact Brown's life and death had on the country in helping to spark the Civil War, and the way it impacted future generations who have both lauded and reviled him.

John Brown's life is a testimony to one man's uncompromising commitment to his ideals, and to the ethical morass that can result from an unrelenting pursuit of those ideals. It makes us question how far one can justifiably go in an attempt to right societal wrongs, and if violence can ever be considered a righteous answer to entrenched evil. Reynolds' book may not answer all of these questions, but it most effectively poses them for our consideration. It is an outstanding biography of a crucially important figure in American history. I highly recommend it, both to those interested in American history, and for anyone who wishes to examine a practical study of the consequence of principled violent action against authority.

Mark says

This book is powerful. I had to stop and ponder things so many times while reading this book. John Brown is singular in the history of America. Here was a man in the 1850's who saw great evil which the laws of the nation supported and each day strengthened. The law becoming a perversion of justice. John Brown must be

understood in the context of his time. Slavery, the murder of abolitionists (Elijah Lovejoy) going unpunished, the Fugitive Slave Act, Compromise of 1850 (repealing the Missouri Compromise of 1820 basically), Kansas-Nebraska Act, sacking of Lawrence, Border Ruffians attacking Free Staters, the caning of Senator Sumner, Lecompton Constitution that made it a crime to even speak against slavery and provided the death penalty for anyone who tried to free a slave.) Top this off with the Dred Scott decision (that said no negro has a right that any white person has to respect) and it is easy to see how people began to see their own government in all branches turning against justice and the Declaration of Independence. Looking at just the isolated acts of John Brown has provoked comparisons to Timothy McVeigh and the Unabomber. I agree with the author here that such comparisons are misleading. Call him a terrorist but think about this when you do: If John Brown was the same as Timothy McVeigh or Osama bi Ladin he would have killed the slaves not the slave-owners.

Roger Bailey says

I learned quite a lot from this book. I have heard of John Brown all my life and, of course, I knew about the massacre of slavers in Kansas and the raid on the arsenal in Harper's Ferry and bits and pieces of his life, but there were a lot of details that I was unaware of. This book fills in a lot of the gaps. The details on the Harper's ferry raid were especially illuminating. John Brown was about as racism and sexism free as anyone could be. This was at a time that even the most ardent abolitionists were convinced of the inferiority of Black people even if they didn't think they deserved to be enslaved and the feminist movement did not see past just achieving suffrage. Brown did not just write and make speeches advocating his views either. He lived them every day of his life. He befuddled Black people by treating them as equals and with respect when white people never did that. He even allowed Black people to set the direction of much of his movement. This all was despite the fact that he was strongly religious too. I recommend this book to today's progressive militants. I do not recommend it because of any lessons on Brown's strategy and tactics. If I was going to recommend it on that basis it would be because of what might be learned from his mistakes -- primarily his adventurism -- but the mistakes he made have been made many times by others who were willing to fight for their causes and there are much better sources to learn about that, especially because the author of this work was not concerned about transmitting such lessons anyway. I recommend it for the inspiration it provides by being the story of a very dedicated freedom fighter and the great sacrifices -- including giving his life -- he was enthusiastically willing to make for the fight for freedom.

Angela says

David Reynolds sympathetic yet critical and probing treatment of John Brown -- once among the most polarizing figures in America history -- is an amazing and thought-provoking book. I use John Brown, and the events surrounding the Kansas "civil war" ("Bleeding Kansas," 1856), along with the events of the raid on Harper's Ferry (October 1859), as part of my freshman seminar on social criticism at the University of Michigan. Brown is an excellent figure to include in such a course for two reasons.

First, Brown's religious background gives us an opportunity to think through the ways in which a religious orientation can inform a radical social critique of an injustice such as slavery. Reynolds is very good on the details of Brown's Puritan heritage and his Calvinist beliefs. Ahead of his time in so many ways, Brown also had an ecumenical streak and was willing to work with people of other faiths, including Jews. Slavery was

for him a grave offense to God and its overthrow involved not only uprooting the vile practice but an affirmation of black humanity (as children of God) as well. Brown also, by the way, supported rights for women and advocated humane treatment of Native Americans.

Reynolds biography goes a long way toward supporting an argument (that I've long made) about the centrality of religious opposition to slavery which, I think, was more central than Enlightenment principles. OK, so Brown was inspired both by the dictates of God and by the Declaration of Independence but his clarity on the issue -- what some would and have called his crazed zealotry -- seems more divinely inspired. What lead Brown to kill in the name of justice -- Faith or Reason?

The other great question that John Brown helps to raise is whether it is morally permissible to kill in defense of justice, or, is violence an acceptable form of social critique? This is the question that made Brown such a polarizing figure, both before and after the Civil War. Henry David Thoreau does a beautiful defense, William Lloyd Garrison denounces him and historians and others are still divided on the issues posed by this "Calvinist terrorist."

I'm just nearing the end of the book now. I've enjoyed it so much that I'm not looking forward to finishing it.

Félix says

It only took me two months and three library renewals to get through this one, with a myocardial infarction occurring within the first couple of days. Reading it was worth the effort, though. Not light entertainment, this one, for sure. It has given me much to ponder. Brown was a complicated, multi-dimensional man -- but singularly courageous and ahead of his time, especially in terms of racial attitudes. The depth of the author's research is astounding as well.

Edward says

I read the Arthur Penn Warren John Brown book and came away thinking of the man as crazy, this book is much better and has totally changed my view. Brown is certainly intense, but not crazy. During his trial a constitution he wrote for his proposed new community was entered into evidence to prove he was crazy. The constitution called for equality of all people blacks, Indians and women. A certain sign of insanity.

It may be that reading this today in the day of Obama is different than thinking of Brown with the background of Leonard Bernstein's cocktail party for the Black Panthers. Brown seemed to have believed in equality even though Whitman and Thoreau (the Leonard Bernsteins of their day) probably did not. Brown is a truly interesting guy, not an historical oddity.

James says

I turned to this book as I was reading *Cloudsplitter* a novel about John Brown by Russell Banks. The novel provided an interesting perspective on the life and family of Brown, but ultimately left me wanting more. Thus to my unexpected relief this enlightened and enlightening cultural biography was able to impress me in several ways, filling in some missing details about John Brown. In it Reynolds thoroughly explores the

connection between the leading Transcendentalists of New England and John Brown. He analyzes in-depth the violence on both sides in Kansas and provides a basis for attempting to understand the complexity of this man. He also provided an informative cultural background highlighting the activities in areas where Brown lived and raised his family. Well-written, the book was a good read and rival to the excellent biography of John Brown by Stephen Oates.

Schlow Library says

"John Brown remains a controversial figure in U.S. history. The abolitionist who embraced violence as a means to end slavery, and whose efforts to provoke a widespread slave revolt faltered at Harper's Ferry in 1859, has been portrayed both as a hero and a devil. In David Reynolds's book 'John Brown, Abolitionist,' the author places him firmly in the context of his own time. Far from being a one-dimensional figure, Reynolds portrays him in all his complexity. A deeply religious man, Brown nonetheless justified murder in the service of liberty. Unlike many abolitionists, he truly believed in that blacks were equal to whites, even founding a town where both lived side by side in peace. A man scarred by the loss of several children to illness, and burdened with debt from multiple failed business schemes, John Brown was still a man of his times, as the rhetoric over the slavery debate turned increasingly militaristic on both sides.

Reynolds demonstrates how Brown's revolt, exactly what many Southerners had long feared, increased tensions between North and South, helping speed the country towards war. Just as interesting is the author's discussion of how Brown was rehabilitated after his execution, to the point that the song 'John Brown's Body' became marching music for Union soldiers by the end of the Civil War. While this book is incredibly weighty at over five hundred pages, for anyone interested in the lead up to the Civil War this will prove an essential read," - Brady

Jennifer says

Being born and raised in Kansas, it is perhaps no surprise that I've always thought the struggle for Kansas's status as a free or slave state was a significant part of what brought about the Civil War. But in an era when Confederate flag enthusiasts are suddenly insisting that the Civil War *wasn't* fought over slavery, it was high time I finally read this book my father had lent me about Brown, and the events sparking the Civil War.

(Spoiler alert: My dad isn't getting this book back.)

I loved this book. And it quickly became a refuge for me in a year of partisan election year bickering and mass shootings and too frequent news of black people being shot by the police. It was odd to me how intensely *fond* I became of Brown, even though I've never been a fan of Calvinism, and what religious feelings I do have urge me towards pacifism. Reynolds makes a strong case here for Brown as the first non-racist white American. To oppose slavery not just because it is happening to some poor creature, but because it was happening to your *brother* -- is it any wonder he ended up taking up arms?

While racism against black people is certainly the cause we most associate with Brown, his radicalism went much further. In planning for the possibility that his assault on southern slave-holding states could lead to the dissolution of the government, Brown and a council of his carefully gathered community wrote a new constitution that established the full equality of all people -- blacks, Indians, women.

I also appreciated this style of "cultural biography," which examined the cultures that shaped Brown, and then how he transcended and transformed those cultures. Like any excellent book, I am left wanting to know much more -- about the Transcendentalists, about Whitman, about Lincoln, etc., etc.

Richard says

John Brown was the most famous, and polarizing, figure to emerge in America in the 1850's, with the exception of Abraham Lincoln. Brown came to personalize the violence which was overcoming the national dialogue over slavery at the time. Many interpretations of Brown have been presented by critics and historians since he died in 1859. Depending on your point of view, he was a villain who incited the North and South to open warfare; to others, he was the avenging angel of abolition. David Reynolds avoids these kinds of knee-jerk reactions. He does not try to categorize Brown as a mad man but at the same time does not shirk from detailing his criminal involvement in the murders of pro-slavery enemies in Kansas and the violent seizure of the U.S. Army arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Reynolds presents his subject as a man greatly affected by the consuming issue of his times, whose actions propelled him to a position in which he in turn greatly affected changes occurring in his country.

The popular imagination contains images of this man as the hatchet-faced, Moses-bearded Bible-spouting extremist who ratcheted up America's race toward Civil War. Movies have helped to present the prevailing visual image. One of the best, from strictly an entertainment value, was "The Santa Fe Trail", a 1940 Warner Brothers swashbuckler vehicle for Errol Flynn. The highly contrived plot has Flynn, as Jeb Stuart (future Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart) graduating from West Point in 1854 with, incorrectly, just about every future Civil War general in his class. Included in this cast of characters was his best friend, future Union Civil War General George Custer, played by Flynn's buddy Ronald Reagan. One of the more laughable historical errors of this movie is that Custer, class of 1862, had graduated actually in 1861 due to wartime needs for officers and could not have participated in any of these events. Anyway, best friends who never were, Stuart and Custer get posted to Fort Leavenworth in the middle of the raging hostilities of Bleeding Kansas, where pro- and anti- slavers were trying to take control of the future state in order to have it entered into the Union as either a slave state or (slave) free state. They run into a desperado who is fomenting, it seems, the most violence, John Brown, portrayed by the great Raymond Massey. Massey presents the visage of a wild-eyed, bearded cold-hearted murderer (Massey actually portrayed Brown as a much more nuanced character in another film several years later).

A fictional confrontation between the reasonable Stuart and the unbending Brown about the need to take action against slavery leads to Stuart's declaration that the northern and southern states will have to work out this problem on their own in time. Actually, the real Stuart owned several slaves and would not have been reasonable for one second in the company of Brown.

Osawatomie Brown, Captain Brown, Old Man Brown was born in Connecticut and raised in Ohio. His father owned a tannery and sent John to an academy to learn to be a minister. The Brown family were deeply religious Calvinists from Puritan stock. John did not stay in academy, marrying and settling in Pennsylvania in order to raise cattle and run his own tannery. His wife Dianthe died after delivering the last of seven children. In 1833, Brown, age 33, married sixteen-year-old May Ann Day, who bore him thirteen more children (typical of the child mortality of the time, a total of eleven of Brown's children lived to adulthood). The early 1840's were especially hard on the family. Brown was totally bankrupt by 1842; in 1843, he and Mary Ann lost four children to dysentery. The family moved to Ohio. During this time period Brown became an expert sheep and wool farmer; he went into a livestock partnership and tried to organize a commission to

represent sheep farmers who were being fleeced financially by the textile industry, but was again bankrupted.

This agrarian American attempt at success led Brown to homesteading in New York in 1848. He settled in an area where poor black farmers were given land grants, near North Elba. He may have been the only white farmer in the country who would live among fellow farmers who were black, and treat them as equals. He had been greatly affected by the example of his father Owen, a follower of the highly influential minister and philosopher Jonathan Edwards, and the Englishman George Whitefield, who together shaped a huge religious movement known as the "First Great Awakening" in 1740's America. Owen passed on to John the Puritan rejection of traditional notions of social stratification. Brown didn't just believe that the Bible taught the doctrine of all men being created equal, and that moral behavior trumped class as a determiner of a man's value in society; he directed his life to literally following these principles.

Brown had been radicalized toward slavery in 1837 when the abolitionist journalist Elijah Parish Lovejoy was murdered by a pro-slavery mob in Illinois. From now on, Brown promised to devote his life to abolishing slavery. In 1855, he followed sons who had moved to Kansas, collecting money along the way from abolitionists and delivering weapons to use in the civil unrest there. Free-staters congregated in several towns, including Pottawatomie, where they were subject to intimidation and assault from "Ruffians" who crossed the border from Missouri. This is where Reynolds shows that the classic view of Puritans as passive observers at that point in history was wrong. Brown became the modern example of Oliver Cromwell (the Puritan who rose to power in the English Civil Wars after supporting the trial and execution of King Charles I in 1649). Adopting Cromwell's adage that it was his destiny to engage in any work required by the Lord, he did not shirk in becoming involved in violent acts. This became clear when he retaliated for the earlier attack on Lawrence, Kansas by directing the abduction of five pro-slave settlers at Ossawatamie in May, 1856, and hacking them to death with broadswords.

A group of 300 Missourians came after Brown and his much smaller band of followers in August to avenge the earlier crime. Brown directed the necessary retreat and salvation of most of his followers with military skill (his son Frederick was killed there), further enhancing his reputation in the North as a skilled warrior in the anti-slavery fight. Based on this reputation, he was able to obtain the support, emotional and financial, of leading abolitionists, especially in New England, over the next several years.

His abolitionist friends included Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. These Transcendentalist non-conformists believed in a personal discipline of self-education and development of the individual, and a philosophy of taking firm stands toward social and political reforms. They were generally denounced by pro-slavers as cowards who fought their battles intellectually. They would embrace Brown, whose reputation for physical bravery and strength of his convictions made him a hero in their eyes.

Brown started to put a plan together for freeing the slaves during this post-Kansas phase. He continued to collect funds and to purchase Sharps rifles and pikes (yes, pikes). He was able to think clearly when making action plans. A primary example was his successful scheme, which came to fruition in October, 1859, to stealthily move himself and a group of about 20 followers into the Harpers Ferry Armory during the night and occupy it, for the purpose of confiscating the tens of thousands of weapons there to arm his rebellion. These weapons, and those he had already purchased, were to defend his supporters and freed slaves from attack; Southern detractors have seen this weapon stockpiling as evidence of a planned insurrection. His thinking became more muddled when he made assumptions for the amount of motivation others would share for his plots. Sure, his sons would dutifully follow him anywhere, but his schemes by this time needed the assistance of far more than his family and some friends could provide. He was aiming for no less than to be a beacon for thousands of escaped slaves to join him in a new state-within-a-state. Starting with the seizure of the armory, when word would quickly go out for slaves to walk off their Virginia plantations and come to

him for arms, the Brown army would move into the Appalachians and rapidly grow in strength, Spartacus style, while Virginia, and then other Southern states' were bled dry of slaves.

Trouble was, the plan didn't work. Brown and his men ended up barricaded in the Engine House, which was stormed by a company of Marines led by U.S. Army Colonel Robert E. Lee. Brown was captured while ten of his men, including sons Watson and Oliver, died. At trial in Jefferson County, Virginia, Brown was found guilty of treason against the state, and he was hanged on December 2, 1859. Even in defeat he refused to be persuaded that he had done anything wrong. His predestination religious beliefs allowed him to accept his outcome, because God willed it. The calmness with which he accepted death brought rapturous praise from Transcendental friends, who immediately began the process of canonizing his image.

In the South, of course, the reaction was different. Nothing put everyone there on edge like even the hint of slave rebellion, and Brown became the specter of the hate and destruction that they were convinced were intended by the Northern states. The spread of Brown paranoia following his death intensified until the ultimate President-elect for 1861 became identified as his chief conspirator. Lincoln's views of national policy toward slavery at the time of the 1860 election was similar to that of the Warner Brothers' fictional Jeb Stuart, that it could not be allowed to continue indefinitely but something needed to be worked out peacefully to change the economic and social slave model. His famous Cooper-Union pre-election speech, according to Reynolds, addressed the issue of Brown head-on. Lincoln denied that any Republican had ever been a friend or follower of Brown, and he labeled Brown's actions as the result of a criminal mad man. Never mind, increasing numbers of Southerners saw no difference between Brown and Lincoln; his election touched off events that would escalate to the American Civil War. In about a year-and-a-half after Brown's hanging, Union soldiers were marching South while singing the tune to "John Brown's body lies a mouldering in the ground ..."

R.K. Byers says

absolutely tremendous.

Michael T. says

Very informative. John Brown was even more interesting than I had imagined. He was, for instance, not just an opponent of slavery, but an opponent of racism in any form during an era when that was very VERY unusual. Even the major Abolitionists of the day clung to a very condescending, paternalistic kind of racism. Not so Captain Brown. I didn't know either that it was the Transcendentalists, Thoreau, Emerson, etc. who rescued Brown from relative obscurity by championing the man and his cause after the raid on Harper's Ferry. Also that up until about 1880 John Brown's reputation was pretty consistently positive, and that, as

racists became predominant and racism reached its zenith (right around the turn of the century), part of that project was the demolition of the image of John Brown as a hero. This conflicted image continued even up to the time of my own education, as Brown was portrayed as a kind of insane religious fanatic. While Brown was an ardent Calvinist in the Puritanical tradition, many of his compatriots were Jews, Deists and Agnostics -- this last even including several of his own sons! He was as adamant about freedom of thought as he was about physical freedom for the enslaved. And I have come to believe that the spotless portrayal of Abraham Lincoln that I DID receive in my early education was actually a portrayal of the best elements of Lincoln combined with the better elements of John Brown. Lincoln, for all of his image as the freer of the slaves, said and apparently believed some astonishingly racist things. Not so Captain Brown. Captain Brown raised a sword against slavery before virtually anyone else in our nation did. And while my inner peace-nik still has mixed feelings about that, I also recognize that Brown's actions prefigured that of every Union soldier who joined the fight, as well as of Lincoln himself. And I accept David Reynolds' assertion that the Civil War would have come with or without Captain Brown, and the longer it took in coming the more horrible it would be. In that sense, John Brown made the bloodiest war in our nation's history still, just a little bit less bloody. And, as WEB DuBois said of him: John Brown was right!

Johnny D says

*"Bones in a grave,
Cover them as they will with choking earth,
May shout the truth to men who put them there,
More than all orators."*

- Edwin Arlington Robinson, John Brown.

This is the first book that I've read on John Brown, so I really do not have a whole lot of previous knowledge to compare it to. Nevertheless, it seems to me that David S. Reynolds' treatment of John Brown is well-crafted. Reynolds does a good job of shredding the repeated contention that John Brown was a madman. He also does very well in his portrayals of John Brown's religious and moral motivations, his unflagging egalitarianism, and the American cultural landscape he worked within.

As an expert in literature, Reynolds brings a unique perspective on the mutual influence that the Transcendentalists and John Brown had on one another. In fact, Reynolds presents a very strong case that if it were not for Ralph Waldo Emerson and company, John Brown's legacy might have never been anything but anathema to the vast majority of white America.

Where Reynolds can be criticized is the occasional repetition of information, his somewhat clumsy justification of the Pottawattamie killings, and his tendency towards infatuation with the character of John Brown. I didn't mind the repetition of information, my memory being what it is. And in the cases where information was repeated, it was often in order to give additional background or insight relating to the theme of each chapter.

Reynolds' treatment of the Pottawattamie killings is also not as bad as it could have been. He has a sense of the nuances and he never argues outright that what Old Brown did was right - he just presents the context in which the killings were committed in. The targets were not arbitrary, the violence was not disconnected from the reality of the time, and the participants did not all feel comfortable about what they had done.

As for Reynolds' infatuation with John Brown, I can understand it perfectly. Here was a man who did not

allow society to dictate to him what was right and what was wrong. In a time of rampant misogyny, racism, and classism, John Brown was a feminist, an anti-racist and an egalitarian. He answered to a higher law and held to the Golden Rule. Even on the precipice, facing his impending execution, he held his head high and spoke with an astounding boldness and power. He showed the weak moral foundations of the pro-slavery south, and he shook them to their very core. The southern slaver, the supposed gentleman, was shown to be a weak-willed bully and a coward. He was a man who loved his fellow man so much that he laid down his very life for them.

"He will make the gallows as glorious as the cross." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Tyler says

The postmodern critique has brought us the "cultural biography," which in this work aims to show three things: 1) how John Brown was a part of the culture he lived in; 2) how he transcended that culture; and 3) how he transformed it. This new approach may sound faddish or obtruse. But David Reynolds makes the final product an astounding account of John Brown's place in history.

I took up the book because I knew so little about Harper's Ferry, even though it had been a watershed in American history. I got much more than I was expecting. Like other readers, I'm left wondering how this study could fail to be the final word on the man.

Reynolds disposes of the canard that Brown was some sort of madman, but beyond that he draws few conclusions. He is right not to do so. John Brown's raid poses one of the hardest moral problems. Resorting to violence or taking action likely to kill people not directly involved in the evil is a dicey act, but the moral dimension drags in with it knotty questions about utilitarianism, the inherent value of human life, and half a dozen topics for which no final court of appeal has yet been found.

To at least put us on the path toward these questions, the author takes time discussing the context in which Brown lived his life, formed his beliefs, and finally acted. I was surprised to find out how much is known about Brown and how much contemporaneous commentary Reynolds could bring to bear. Without taking sides, he recounts reactions to the raid. But it's not necessary to take sides to see the astonishing changes roiling the United States in the wake of the raid and John Brown's trial and hanging.

Helping the book is Reynold's deft prose. He is, in fact, an English professor, and as he leads readers through Brown's life he builds a sense of drama suitable to the incredible mark on history the man would finally make. But nowhere is the author's skill more effective than when he recounts the aftermath of the raid on Harper's Ferry. I found myself reading that section of the book again and again, admiring in particular the way the author depicts for us today the thunderous effect on the nation of Brown's courtroom *Apologia*. Could a man with so little formal education have given the best speech ever delivered in American history?

I was left at the end of the book with the sense of a man whose beliefs and actions have everything to do with the kind of country the United States is now, and what it might become. People argue whether he was a freedom fighter or a terrorist. I say people. For America's blacks there has never been a shred of doubt what he was. But what's unique about this book is that it shows beyond any doubt on anyone's part that John Brown was a prophet -- a prophet of the American Enlightenment. Would a John Brown be possible in today's America, Reynolds asks. The question is disturbing. For if such a man is no longer possible, something has necessarily changed for the worse. That's not my opinion. That's a prophecy.

