

‘John Brown, Abolitionist’: A Soldier in the Army of the Lord

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JOHN BROWN, ABOLITIONIST The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights. By David S. Reynolds. Illustrated. 578 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$35.

THIS may not be the most auspicious time for a sympathetic biography of a religious fanatic who repeatedly sought to advance his cause through violence. Even before the war on terrorism, John Brown had been largely relegated to a loony sidebar of American history. The high school history textbooks that the sociologist James Loewen surveyed in 1995 either brushed Brown off or labeled him insane, while, at a loftier level of intellectual discourse, Michael Ignatieff accused him of “sadistic self-righteousness.” So it takes courage, if not a touch of Brownian madness, to argue, as David S. Reynolds does in his absorbing new biography, “John Brown, Abolitionist,” that Brown was not the Unabomber of his time, but a reasonable man, well connected to his era’s intellectual currents and a salutary force for change.

Reynolds, a professor of English and American studies at the City University of New York, best known for his book “Walt Whitman’s America,” buries the insanity charge under a mountain of contrary evidence. Even Brown’s seemingly suicidal raid on Harpers Ferry represented a strategy no crazier than the Civil War practice of throwing infantry into massed rifle fire and hoping a few men would survive to break through the enemy lines: Brown’s long study of slave revolts suggested that an act of exemplary violence would set off huge slave uprisings and self-emancipation. And what could be saner than his 1858 attack on three Kansas slave owners, in which Brown freed 11 blacks with only a single death?

As for Brown’s monomaniacal hostility to slavery, which seems so inexplicable to many critics, he was not the only white man so afflicted. The antislavery publisher Elijah Lovejoy, for example, had his printing presses destroyed three times by pro-slavery mobs in Illinois. Each time, he coolly acquired a new press and went on crusading, until the mob got him.

Nor did Brown’s rigidly Calvinist version of Christianity isolate him intellectually, binLaden-style, from the intellectual ferment of his time. Reynolds reports that he traveled long distances to hear feminist lecturers, and took their cause to heart. At various times, his little band of armed recruits included Jews and agnostics, and engaged in heated discussions of “religious themes, mesmerism, ventriloquism, necromancy, spiritualism, psychology,” not to mention earthquakes and astronomy. More important for Brown’s legitimacy, he was embraced by the leading intellectuals of his time, Henry Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who found in him an exemplar of the “higher law” their Transcendentalism aspired to.

To those who argue that Brown’s commendable goals were sullied by his bloody methods, Reynolds retorts that violence was in fact central to his message and his legacy. In the 1850’s, it was the pro-slavery forces that held a monopoly on armed force — terrorizing antislavery citizens in the Midwest as well as the South, or proudly proclaiming, as did one Kansas newspaper editor, that he lived to kill an abolitionist: “If I can’t kill a man, I’ll kill a woman; and if I can’t kill a woman, I’ll kill a

child!” Antislavery activists, on the other hand, were often pacifists and usually the victims of their political opponents — a relationship symbolized by a South Carolina congressman’s crippling beating of the abolitionist Charles Sumner on the floor of the United States Senate. With his guns and pikes, Brown reversed the equation -stiffening the backbones of Northern abolitionists, terrifying the white South — and hastening, through both effects, the Civil War and emancipation.

There are times when Reynolds goes almost as far as the Transcendentalists in beatifying Brown. Maybe the Brown family members were, as Reynolds claims, the only nonracist whites in America. Certainly Reynolds cites some appallingly racist statements by antislavery leaders, including Abraham Lincoln. Brown, in contrast, fought not only to end slavery but to achieve full equality of the races, a goal he prefigured by recruiting blacks into leadership roles in his armed band and by settling in the largely black community of North Elba, N.Y. But the reader might wonder why Brown attracted so few black men to his Harpers Ferry raid and, devastatingly enough, failed to give the local slaves a heads-up in the weeks before.

Reynolds also portrays Brown as a sort of all-around progressive saint, sympathetic to the various liberation movements of his time. But his credentials as a feminist are undermined by the fact that he inflicted 20 births on two sequential wives, the first of whom was mentally unstable. There is disappointingly little here about Mary Brown, the stolid second wife who ran the farm and raised the children while her husband raided Kansas and swanned around New England’s abolitionist circles. Did she get to travel to the suffrage lectures with him? I tend to doubt it.

On the other hand, there are points where Reynolds might have been stronger in Brown’s defense. After the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) and the Dred Scott decision (1857), white people of conscience could no longer content themselves with supporting the Underground Railroad. A slave was a slave anywhere, the law declared, and for all time. Violence was beginning to look like the answer, not just to Brown, but eventually to Lincoln too.

It was Brown’s killing of five Pottawatomie, Kan., pro-slavery men — dragged from their beds and hacked to death — that has made commentators queasy ever since, Reynolds included to some extent. He offers the rather feeble judgment that it would be “misleading” to compare the Pottawatomie attack to modern terrorism. Yet if terrorism is defined as the random killing of civilians to make a political point, then it is not just misleading to call Brown a terrorist, it is flat-out wrong. Brown selected his victims carefully; all had reportedly threatened abolitionists and the Brown family in particular. At any rate, the Pottawatomie violence exacted a high price: Brown’s son John Jr. suffered a long episode of insanity, and three other sons remained deeply disturbed by the killings.

How do we judge a man of such different times — and temperament — from our own? If the rule is that there must be some proportion between a violent act and its provocation, surely there could be no more monstrous provocation than slavery. In our own time, some may discern equivalent evils in continuing racial oppression, economic

exploitation, environmental predation or widespread torture. To them, “John Brown, Abolitionist,” for all its wealth of detail and scrupulous attempts at balance, has a shockingly simple message: Far better to have future generations complain about your methods than condemn you for doing nothing.

Barbara Ehrenreich’s most recent book is “Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America.”

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