

# **John Brown's Body**

**150 years is a long time to moulder**

Paul Z. Simons

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John Brown; Abolitionist; The Man who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights. David S. Reynolds, Vintage Books, New York, NY. 578 pages.

John Brown is probably the closest thing we have in the US to a real flesh and blood heroic contradiction. For conservatives his name rings with calls to bloodshed and freeing the blacks, for liberals he is the man who put civil rights, in its modern definition, on the political map. And finally, for extremists, of all types the man is a real old-fashioned role model. A guy who was unwilling or unable to bend conscience to law, and in the process sparked the only intentional insurrection aimed at challenging US sovereignty in the republics history (excepting the Confederate states secession, of course). This piece is meant to provide a twofold discussion of Brown, first as a review of the book referenced above, and second as a discussion of Brown in light of the anarchist political ramifications, if any, of his actions.

Brown comes out of a pure New England heritage, born in Torrington Connecticut on May 9, 1800, and claiming, probably correctly, to be a direct descendent of Peter Brown, one of the Mayflower company. What distinguishes Brown, right from the beginning however, is being reared in a home that virtually oozed Calvinist Puritanism of the most extreme kind. And here is where things get interesting for the observer because the general attitude and perception of modern society to Puritanism really doesn't do the religion and its core concepts justice. First it should be noted that much discussed sexual repression, supposedly rampant among the Puritans, is wholly inaccurate. Though they did view the humanity as utterly corrupt and whose sole salvation can be obtained solely through the sacrifice of Christ, that didn't mean however that sexuality was prohibited. Churches that don't believe in sexual intercourse don't last long, witness the Shakers. One puritan tradition provides an example, prior to marriage, it was customary for the betrothed to spend at least one night, sometimes several, sleeping together in the same bed in order to ensure the physical "compatibility," for the future life-partners. In some instances the groom-to-be was sewn into a sheet to make sure that nothing too outrageous should occur over the course of the night. I wonder, though, how many of those cotton cocoons were found to be intact in the morning, and how many were feverishly torn apart in the dark of the night and perhaps a bit stained come morning...

So along side the utter physical corruption of humanity, the fear of God, the necessity of grace, the requirement of charity and compassion for all God's creatures there exists in Puritanism the seeds of some pretty seditious stuff. First, and most obvious in Brown's case, is the issue of slavery which had been discussed and was a point of contention within all the dissenting churches in England. The puritans, like the Quakers, and especially the American variation of puritanism went to great lengths to condemn slavery, and to participate in its circumvention. In 1700 the Calvinist judge Samuel Sewall had penned and published the pamphlet *The Selling of Joseph*, which argued, among other things that blacks should be treated according to the Golden Rule. George Whitefield, a Calvinist minister who toured the Americas in 1739, in a letter to Southern slaveholders warns, "The blood of them, spilt for years, in your respective provinces, will ascend up to heaven against you." The preaching of the American Calvinists Jonathan Edwards, and his son, Jonathan Edwards Jr., bring a violence and apocalyptic quality to the vision of abolitionism that figures heavily in Brown's own ideas.

The real linkage of Puritanism to radicalism in the 19th century occurs through the central role that antinomianism played in Calvinist theology. Behind the extreme reliance placed by the Calvinists upon individual interpretation of the Bible lurks the very real anarchist sentiment that no law is higher than individual conscience, and that conscience trumps law, always, period. The author states, "this [Puritan] spirit fostered a law-flouting individualism that appeared variously in militant Abolitionism, Transcendentalist self-reliance, and the 'individual sovereignty' championed by anarchists and free-love activists..." Emerson, perhaps the best example of this finely tuned New England puritan intellectual machine states admiringly in an 1844 lecture, "The Puritan element which demands religious freedom, as the birth-right of Heaven, in matters spiritual, is the nourisher of that civil liberty which releases the body from secular despotism in matters temporal."

The Southern slaveholders and their apologists understood, as well, where the enemy was coming from. In 1863 Samuel Cox, a democratic pro-slavery congressman stated, "Abolition is the offspring of ....Puritanism is a reptile which has been boring into...the Constitution and this civil war comes in like a devouring sea!" Another pro-slavery journalist commented, "Everybody who ever saw a Puritan knows that from the days of Calvin and Knox, down to those of Cotton Mather, and still later to ...John Brown—everybody knows they have been the same arrogant, self-righteous, conceited race—each man acting on the belief of his own infallibility and of other people's fallibility."

Enter John Brown, whose father Owen, had been not only deeply affected by Calvinist Puritanism, and who later in life had taken up the anti-slavery gauntlet to the extent that he became an agent of the Underground Railroad, and withdrew financial support from Western Reserve College in Ohio because blacks were refused entry into the institution. When John was five Owen Brown moved the entire family to Hudson, Ohio, a town in the Western Reserve that had seen multiple migrations of New Englanders, so much so that the Western reserve came to be known as New Connecticut. Brown was raised in an area where Native Americans vastly outnumbered white settlers, and most of his childhood friends were boys from surrounding Indian tribes.

Seems every historian looks for that defining moment in the lives of historical agents when the "turn" occurs. When as a result of circumstance and experience the individual, knowingly or not, sets a course that will cause an intersection (collision?) with destiny that produces "history". Reynolds isn't immune to this urge and he sets Brown's militant abolition on its course as a result of two incidents in his early life. One is banal, and exactly what you'd expect for a man who viscerally hated slavery, the other, however, is something of a revelation which provides a unique look into the man that Brown was, and the anarchist he might have become. Brown often accompanied his father on cattle drives during the War of 1812 to soldiers stationed in Detroit under General William Hull. On one of these drives Brown befriended a young slave at a night stopover, and was horrified to see his master beat him with kitchen utensils and then force him to sleep in a barn wearing nothing but rags. Brown immediately recognized, "the wretched, hopeless condition of Fatherless & Motherless slave children; for such have neither Fathers nor Mothers to protect and provide for them." Brown would describe the experience as being part of the process that made him

“in the end ...a most determined Abolitionist,” and eventually to “declare, or Swear; Eternal war on Slavery.”

The other event that is given prominence in Brown's early life is his exposure to the soldiers of Hull's army. The profanity, disobedience and coarseness of the soldiers appalled Brown and he wrote later that what he experienced, “was to so far disgust him with Military affairs that he would neither train, or drill; but paid fines & got along like a Quaker until his age finally cleared him of Military duty.” So much for his sense of loyalty to government or military service.

A significant portion of the book deals with Brown's coming of age and adult business dealings and family life. He tried a number of trades primarily in agriculture and just couldn't seem to pull off the American Dream. He was well backed by banks and wealthy individuals with loans for purchases of land, business interests and the like yet less due to diligence than just cursed bad luck and an inability to produce that petty viciousness that characterizes American business culture in all ages, he continually, and occasionally spectacularly, failed to put any of his endeavors on a paying basis. As one of his backers noted, Brown wasn't dishonest, just ill equipped to make money. Brown was married twice, fathered some 20 children, and appears to have been a strict, but loving father and husband. His children would internally disagree on their father's militant Abolitionism particularly the Harper's Ferry insurrection (two of his sons died in the raid) but remained steadfast in support of his goals. His daughters were particularly anti-slavery and were always pushing the men to participate in their father's activities. In later years, and with the triumph of the North in the Civil War, many of his children, again particularly the women, would find their own injustices to fight. It is known that the Haymarket Martyr Albert Parsons had been in contact with several members of the Brown family after the civil war, and found some justification for his anarchism echoed by Brown's economic ideas.

Brown's travels for business brought him into contact with a large variety of abolitionists and fellow travelers. He seems to, at one time or another, have turned up on every doorstep of every radical abolitionist in the US and Canada, seeking support, securing funding and discussing ways to destroy the slavery. His own ideas proceeded apace and he began to dig into the history of slave revolts and utopian communities for insights into how to free and provide for every slave held in the United States. His answer is uniquely insurrectionist and presage many post-industrial writers, especially our own Hakim Bey.

Brown began research into slave revolts and while they varied in tactics, strategies, and geographic placement, what he was really looking for was a guide to follow, a blueprint for a successful sustained insurrection. He found it in Nat Turner's 1831 revolt. Turner's initial rapid, violent strike, the liberation of as many slaves as possible and then a retreat into the wilderness from which to hide and to continue further incursions against slave-holders was studied, debated and eventually adapted into the overarching strategy that Brown would follow at Harper's Ferry. The major difference between the two is that Brown would seek to duplicate Turner's plan, not on a handful of Virginia plantations and in a fairly limited region, but across the entire South, and including the liberation of all slaves in that area. One strength of his plans was the geography of the eastern states. In his business travels Brown had become familiar with the Appalachians, extending from Maine to Georgia, and

in Brown's estimation a perfect natural screen from which to strike into the South, and to use as shelter when chased. Brown planned to send non-combatant freed slaves north, to Canada if necessary, and the remainder would stay and fight in the mountain redoubt freeing more and more slaves until the South would have to, of necessity, discontinue slavery. To quote Brown, "Nat Turner, with fifty men, held Virginia for five weeks. Twenty men in the Alleghenies could break slavery to pieces in two years." And what would this mobile, multi-racial community look like, striking at slave-holders and plantations, moving and running as needed? Brown's reading led him to maroon communities as his model. Maroons, from the French *marronage* meaning flight, or perhaps the *cimarrones* meaning wild, untamed—were groups of slaves which had escaped into the wilderness, had founded communities and defended these from incursion by slave-holders, soldiers, or other forces of civilization using guerilla tactics and knowledge of the terrain. As was known to Brown, maroons predated the landing of the Mayflower by a century. The Spanish explorer Lucas Vazquez de Ayllon founded a colony in South Carolina, probably at the mouth of the Pee Dee River. Included in the goods brought to found the outpost were some 100 black slaves. The Spaniards relocated to Haiti shortly after founding the colony and left behind a significant population of the slaves who retreated into the interior and lived with the natives. As Bey and others have pointed out these maroon communities composed of whites, blacks and natives (tri-racial isolates) are an important precursor of American drop-out culture and more is left to be written on their importance. Brown thought the tactic ideal for his planned insurrectionary communities, and explicitly used examples of maroon military successes to gain backing and finances for the coming incursion from his anti-slavery supporters. These examples include the Second Seminole War of 1835 to 1841, where a small but potent force of black and Seminole warriors launched guerrilla battles all through Florida, killing 1,600 settlers and soldiers and eventually causing the US government to spend 40 million dollars to end the War. In this confrontation the blacks were described by a correspondent as, "the most formidable force, more blood-thirsty, active and revengeful than the Indians." Brown had also studied the Caribbean maroons and insurrections, especially Touissant l'Ouverture's successful insurrection against both slavery and French governance of Haiti. Though eventually captured, imprisoned and killed, his armed forces continued the struggle and in 1804 ended both French colonization and slavery at a stroke.

So, Brown has a plan for fighting and freeing slaves, and a military plan for maintaining and spreading the insurrection, and a plan as how to the communities of the freed slaves may look, all he needs is money, an army and weapons. No small task, but then— Kansas began to bleed, and the opportunities for violent abolitionists, like himself, to cause mayhem and secure wealthy Eastern backers became plentiful.

Brown's sons, John Jr., Jason, and Salmon and their families, were the first in his immediate circle to move to Kansas, taking advantage of both the opportunity for cheap land and to combat pro-slavery forces face to face. Their letters throughout 1855 became increasingly alarming to Brown, "There are slaves owned within three miles of us," wrote Salmon. And John Jr., in a letter requesting money for guns, states, "the great drama will open here, when will be presented the great struggle in arms, of Freedom and Despotism in America. Give us the arms and we will be ready for the contest." Brown raised some money from

Eastern supporters, and also took the decision to travel to Kansas himself and see what he could do for his children, and against the slavers. His actions there would prove to be not only the beginning of his life as a military insurrectionist, it would also provide the abolitionist movement with the spectacle of one of their number fighting back against the violence of pro-slavery forces; and fighting back in a manner that was both savage and effective.

Brown, along with a son-in-law and another son, Oliver, arrived in Kansas in late fall of 1855. The summer had been pleasant but recent wind and rain storms had ravaged the crops and excepting one or two family members all were suffering from malaria. Brown quickly built a shelter for the family and hauled in any crops that were salvageable and waited for the political winds to warm. In December Brown and sons were alerted that pro-slavery forces were on the move towards Lawrence, and with as many men as he could gather, rode to Lawrence in expectation that pro-slavery forces were about to sack the town. The skirmish that ensued was minor with both sides claiming victory, and yet it showed to all observers that social peace in Kansas had become a fragile, and rare, commodity.

The event most associated with Brown's name, other than Harper's Ferry, is the killing of several pro-slavers during the night of May 26, 1856 at Pottawatomie creek. The cycles of violence in Kansas swept the Browns into the storm, and their response was as uncompromising as their own unique brand of extreme abolition. In the months prior to Pottawatomie pro-slavery forces had exacted terrible costs on the free-staters. Beatings, public humiliation, and murder were all visited on free state men and their families, usually with no official response whatever. Worse, in the eyes of Brown and his family, the free-staters seemed willing to suffer such abuse without so much as a whimper; not only did they not fight to free slaves, they didn't even fight to defend themselves. It was all too much for Brown, and with the news of the caning of Senator Charles Sumner by Preston Brooks on the floor of the senate on May 22 his patience came to an end. Sumner was badly beaten in the attack and was absent from the Senate for three years to recuperate. When news of the attack reached Brown and his party Jason Brown reported, "At the blow the men went crazy—crazy. It seemed to be the finishing decisive touch." One of the company urged restraint and caution to which Brown replied, "Caution, caution, sir. I am eternally tired of hearing that word caution. It is nothing but the word of cowardice."

There comes a time in the historical drama when bloodshed, while not elegant, nor necessary, just makes a whole lot of sense; and violence seemed the obvious response to these events. Every insurrection against the forces of law and authority are examples of such moments, the Commune, the storming of the Bastille, and Pottawatomie. Brown and his sons had seen free-staters beaten, murdered, out-foxed at the ballot box, derided by then President Franklin Pierce, all to the purpose of turning Kansas into a slave state. It was time for payback.

Brown, and four of his sons, Salmon, Frederick, Owen and Oliver, with two others made their way up Pottawatomie creek. In the process they roused several pro-slavery men from their slumbers, took them into the night and stabbed and shot them to death. These were brutal deaths, in which the victims had hands and fingers sliced off while trying to stop the blows of swords, usually ending in a coup de grace by pistol shot to the head. A total of five were dispatched after which the Brown party returned to their base camp where

other free-state soldiers and rifle companies had gathered. Word of the murders spread fast, both south and east, and it was generally acknowledged that Brown in the space of a single night had changed the impression that Abolitionists were laughable cowards who ran from a fight and meekly submitted to public caning to one of brutal, violence-prone, slavery-hating maniacs. After Pottawatomie the impression in the South, and particularly of Brown, was that these abolitionists seemed like demons intent on killing Southern men, attacking Southern institutions, and defaming Southern cooking. The brutal details of the murders also made the rounds in the press and through rumor causing revulsion in the South and driving the abolitionists to that place of soul-searching they would visit often throughout the civil war as tens of thousands died in defense of slavery and secession or abolition and the union; depending on one's perspective. Brown stayed in Kansas for another six months fighting pro-slavery forces as the need arose. Mostly these skirmishes were fought to draws as federal soldiers rushed from place to place to stamp out the fires of violence. Brown and his followers did decisively beat a much larger force of pro-slavers at Black Jack, but the Kansas wars were ending. More federal control was being exerted in the state, and slowly a consensus of opinion was developing that pushed Kansas firmly into the Free State column. A mass informal clemency was granted by Kansas Governor Geary, which had the effect of relieving Brown and followers from being charged with murder, carnage, or anything else.

What a change for Brown in a year, from frontiersman to criminal to warrior for freedom; at least so it seemed in the perception of the press and certain lawmakers. Brown was now to parlay all that good press into money, men and material for his final act, a slave insurrection that would topple slavery, and could lead to the founding of a new republic in the South, a republic of ex-slaves and former masters. Brown had drafted a constitution and had it ratified by a "convention" of freed slaves and sympathizers in Canada. Brown, the revolutionary, sought to justify the insurrection, and even provide for a measure of post-facto legality. Brown had been in contact with a group of wealthy New England financiers and industrialists who condoned his activities and largely funded his various paramilitary initiatives. These men, called in the press after Harper's Ferry, the Secret Six, were a mixed bag of liberals, the deeply religious, all of them vigorously opposed to slavery and devoted to its abolition by any means necessary, and Brown had been friendly with many of them for several years. He collected all the material, men and money he could gather and moved in small, increments towards Harper's Ferry. The Ferry located in Northern Virginia (now West Virginia) was an ideal spot for Brown to begin his war of liberation from. The town held a Federal Armory, where the U.S. manufactured and stored rifles, bullets, and all manner of small arms, there was also a rifle factory and the countryside surrounding the town was dotted with medium size farms, all with sizable slave populations. The town was perfectly situated so that Brown, after seizing arms and freeing slaves could repair to the vastness of the Blue Ridge Mountains and launch raids against slaveholders while evading federal troops and state militias. Even now, some two hundred years on, the plan sounds pretty hare-brained. Brown, however, was convinced it would work, and Reynolds seems to side with him in defending the relative military soundness of the venture. There is one exception that neither man takes into account which is guerrilla forces survive by being surrounded by a sympathetic, or even neutral peasantry or small village population. The first modern

guerrilla force, the Boers, knew this, and T.E. Lawrence, the military and intellectual father of all guerrilla movements in the twentieth century builds his entire tactical framework on a sympathetic population who provide information on the enemy and recruits for the insurgents. Mao said that if the revolutionaries are fish, then the peasantry is the water through which they swim. Brown would have found few supporters among the white occupants of Blue Ridge farms and cabins, who while too poor to own slaves, would still have drunk deep of the racism brewed at that time and in that place. In all Brown finally ended up with 21 soldiers, he had wanted 50 but couldn't wait any longer and had no time for another recruiting drive north. These men included some 16 white men and 5 blacks, including one freed slave who, among other things, hoped to free his wife and children as a result of the raid. Brown had also been in contact with Fredrick Douglass and tried repeatedly to interest him in the operation; Douglass refused, stating that he felt the raid was suicide and would not achieve even a small degree of success. Harriet Tubman, by contrast, desperately wanted to go but was too ill to travel.

So it starts, on Sunday night, October 16th 1959, Brown left three of the men in their rented farmhouse to act as a rearguard as the remaining raiders hopped into a wagon for the short ride to Harper's Ferry. Two other soldiers hopped out along the way and went to cut the telegraph wires east and west of the town. Brown and company came to the bridge that stretched across the Potomac, and took the night watchman hostage, an aging and benign man who was familiar with many of the raiders and had initially assumed they were either drunk or playing a game. The raiders then headed for the armory, located on the banks of the Potomac, and seized the guard and forced the gate. The guard, John Whelan, was told to keep still or he would be killed. Brown announced, "I came here from Kansas, and this is a slave state; I want to free all the negroes in this state; I have possession of the United States armory, and if the citizens interfere with me I must only burn the town and have blood." The arsenal across the street was seized and two raiders walked across town to take possession of the Bridge over the Shenandoah River. Brown and a small group of men set off for Hall's Rifle Works, and on the way took several citizens hostage. They easily broke in the munitions factory and held the hostages there, to be freed after the raiders had left town. Two of the raiders were left there to be joined later by a third. Six men, three white and three black, were sent to rouse the countryside, free slaves and return to the Ferry with them. The six made for Louis Washington's plantation first, the great-great grandnephew of George Washington, Brown wanted two of his possessions with which to lead the army to end slavery, a pistol given by Lafayette to Washington, and the sword which Frederick the Great had sent to Washington, after the final triumph at Yorktown. These things were procured and then the raiders announced the final insult, they had also come to free his slaves. At this news Washington collapsed and he was placed in a wagon with his ex-slaves and trundled off to the Ferry. The hostages and freed slaves arrived at the armory and Brown provided each of the black men with a pike and instructed them to not let any of the white hostages escape.

Thus far, everything had gone well, Brown was in effective control of the town, he controlled the bridges, cut the telegraph lines, seized a number of slaves and freed them and now it was time to exit quickly to the vast wilderness of the mountains. That is not, however,



what happened. Brown began to dawdle, he had expected more slaves to join him, and those that did join him were looking very uncomfortable and uneasy with their new roles as liberators. The reaction isn't surprising, to have group of men, black and white, pronounce you not only free but to place a weapon in your hands and expect you to use it against your former master would push the bounds of anyone's credibility. Hostile witnesses after the raid maintained that the not one of the freedmen joined Brown. This seems overly pessimistic, Washington's coachman Jim seems to have been ready for a fight, and one of Brown's soldiers in the aftermath stated that Jim fought like a "tiger," and as he was killed in the final assault the assessment seems borne out. So Brown dallied through the night and into the morning of the October 17th, the raiders at the Rifle Works sent repeated messages imploring Brown to move out of town to no avail.

Things had actually begun to deteriorate around midnight when the relief guard at the Potomac bridge came on duty. He immediately saw that something was wrong, and when two men walked out of the shadows and told him to halt he made a beeline for the Galt House, a saloon. He told his story to the barman who thought him drunk or crazy, and proceeded out to see what was really going on. He was taken prisoner and held in the bridge watch house. At 1:25 the train from Wheeling was heard rumbling toward town and the watchmen ran to warn the engineers. The train was stopped and turned back by gunfire. The first casualty of the conflict occurred when Shephard Hayward a free black and baggage handler for the railroad walked across the racks to see what was happening, shots rang out and he fell mortally wounded with a bullet lodged just below the heart. The first casualty of a war to free black people was a free black person. Meanwhile the Wheeling train was waiting for some sign to either return to Wheeling or to proceed. Brown sent a message at 7am that the train could pass and it chugged across the two bridges. Brown must have forgotten that letting the train pass negated his cutting of the telegraph wires, and sure enough the train stopped at Monocacy and the conductor wired a horror story to the Baltimore train yard employees regarding 150 Abolitionists who had take the Ferry, were freeing slaves and arming themselves. The telegram made its way to W.P. Smith the director of transportation for the railroad who assumed something akin to mass hallucination and wired back for details of the situation. The telegram also made it to John Garrett, the head of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad and he knew deep in his gut it was real, and he also felt that Brown was somehow mixed up in this ugly event. At 10:30 Garrett wired President Buchanan and Henry Wise Governor of Virginia with details and his own take on what was happening in the town. Preparations were immediately made for the movement of troops to the Ferry.

The latest Brown could have stayed was noon on the 17th, thereafter the roads were clogged with troops from Maryland and Virginia, both federal and state militia's, hurrying towards the scene. Brown was as static in the morning as he had been through the night, with morning light he had exchanged a hostage for breakfast from the Wager House Hotel, though he and his men ate nothing for fear of being poisoned. Meanwhile citizen soldiers had converged on the armory and arsenal from all points of the compass, and Brown seeing their movements suddenly snapped back into action; he ordered that portholes be cut into the walls to fire their rifles from and moved everyone into the engine house of the armory. He instructed his men to be frugal with their shot and powder, and to make every shot count.

In the action men were called back from their posts on the bridges and at other strategic points in Harper's Ferry, while falling back one of Brown's black soldiers, Dangerfield Newby, was shot and killed. The first raider casualty was a black man. There would be more.

The battle was joined by around 300 members of the local militias that first day, arrayed against the ten or so men left in Brown's force. One raider had been captured in the early morning and was subsequently killed by a vengeful mob while another of Brown's men had been killed by a point blank shot to the face. In both cases their bodies were left in the Potomac and used for target practice by militia members through the day. Owen, Brown's son, while peering out the doors of the engine house had taken a bullet to the bowels and it took him twelve hours to die. Brown and his raiders were giving as good as they got, however, and the local militia commander E.G. Alburtis was not about to order a final rush on the armory. The militias pulled back to either bridge and waited for the federal troops to arrive and finish the job. The two raiders left in the arsenal had not fired since early afternoon and as the sun set on the 17th they snuck out of town, past the increasingly intoxicated mob to return to the farmhouse they had rented and lived in prior to the raid. Under flag of truce a citizen had delivered to Brown a demand for his surrender, which he refused and offered instead hostages for safe passage to the Maryland side of the Ferry, which was also refused. Brown was now down to five uninjured men in the engine house including himself.

Colonel Robert E. Lee and a company of ninety marines arrived shortly before midnight and set about arranging the final skirmish. Lee asked his lieutenant J.E.B. Stuart to approach the engine house under white flag and offer one last chance to surrender, if Brown refused Stuart was to make a signal and a company of the marines would force the door and storm the defenders. The plan worked and in the process Brown was wounded by a sword thrust to the side and several blows to the head, two of the other raiders were killed outright and Watson, Brown's other son among the raiders, died later of a gunshot received during the battle. Brown's raid was ended, and like the Tet offensive one hundred years later, military defeat was about to be translated, by the media and commentators, into historical triumph.

Brown's composure throughout his imprisonment, trial and execution was exemplary, he was firm, compassionate and his presence commanded attention if not outright respect. Even the southerners who despised him couldn't help but feel they were in the presence of some elemental force. Henry A. Wise, governor of Virginia, said it all when he was asked about Brown's boldness, "He was the gamest man I ever met." Opinion in the nation was uniformly negative with one small, and important exception, that handful of thinkers and writers who lived in and around Concord Massachusetts; the Transcendentalists.

While not known for their political engagement, beginning in the 1850's the Transcendentalists found themselves half dragged by events and half forced by their own writings to take a more and more active (and pro-violence) stance against slavery. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was the initiating event for the Transcendentalists. Upon passage Theodore Parker, a close associate of Thoreau and Emerson, formed a vigilance

committee to protect fugitive slaves and to hunt down and shame (or kill) slave hunters. This committee came into its own in 1854 with the capture of Anthony Burns a fugitive slave who was to be returned south and who was being held at the Boston Courthouse. Parker and Thomas Wentworth Higginson (one of the Secret Six) formed a rescue party and led a battering ram assault at the courthouse setting off a scuffle with police in which one officer was killed. When the attack was repulsed Higginson, wounded and bleeding, wanted to try again and accused his comrades of cowardice. Bronson Alcott, another transcendentalist not in on the attack but who happened to walk by as it was progressing and with the withdrawal of the attackers calmly spoke with Higginson and ascended the courthouse steps amid gunfire and asked the cowed attackers, "Why are we not within?" When they failed to respond he slowly descended the steps, again ignoring the gunfire from the courthouse.

On July 4, 1854 a month after Burns had been returned to slavery Thoreau was through with half measures and he threw the intellectual gauntlet down as loudly and brashly as he could. In a lecture, reported in the press, he ran down a list of what ailed him, the Fugitive Slave Act? "It's natural habitat is in the dirt with every form of venomous reptile." The U.S. Constitution? An outdated pro-slavery document. The press? A gurgling sewer filled with "slime". The United States? "I did not know at first what ailed me. At last it occurred to me that what I had lost was a country. My thoughts are murder to the state, and involuntarily I go plotting against her."

Emerson too found a political voice as a result of the slavery issue. He wrote of any nation that pursues fugitive slaves, "I submit that all government is bankrupt, all law turned upside down; that the government itself is treason." His remedy is justice meted out by an armed and aware citizenry, and his example is California during the gold rush where anarchy and vigilante justice ruled. A situation he judged to be, "the best government that ever existed."

Brown meets and woos the Transcendentalists in 1857 during one of swings through New England to raise money, to enroll volunteers for Kansas. They immediately took to Brown and comparisons between Brown and Cromwell fell thick and fast from many Transcendentalist pens in the coming year.

With Harper's Ferry, and the entire range of national opinion abused Brown as a monster, maniac, molester of farm animals, and disturber of the peace. Even the anti-slavery press moved rapidly away from him, accusing him of being less than sane, though well-meaning. Additionally, two of the Secret Six funders moved rapidly away from Brown claiming they had no idea he was fomenting insurrection with their money. Fredrick Douglass even fled to England for a year to escape charges of complicity in the insurrection. Thoreau had seen and heard enough. People were running from Brown, he would claim friendship and kinship with the old man, and he would defend him, in public. On October 30, just 12 days after the insurrection Thoreau announced that he would defend Brown from the pulpit of Concord's First Church. The county Republican Party and the local anti-slavery committee called the idea "impolitic" when informed by Thoreau of the lecture. He snapped back, "I did not send to you for advice, but to announce I am to speak." The address he gave, "A Plea for Captain John Brown" was a forceful vindication of the mission to Harper's Ferry and of Brown the Calvinist, sure of his moral compass in spite of the cowardice of the abolitionists and the evil of the slave holders.

Brown's trial lasted a week and in spite of some legal wrangling it was a clear he would be found guilty and hung. He was tried alone, but several of his men both white and black would also be tried and executed. Sentence was pronounced on Brown on November 2, and the date of execution was set for December 2. Prior to the Judge passing sentence he had asked Brown if there were any reason why he should not be found guilty, and he responded with perhaps his best known oration, which is presented following:

I have, may it please the court, a few words to say. In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted – the design on my part to free the slaves. I intended certainly to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter when I went into Missouri and there took slaves without the snapping of a gun on either side, moved them through the country, and finally left them in Canada. I designed to have done the same thing again on a larger scale. That was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.

I have another objection; and that is, it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered in the manner which I admit, and which I admit has been fairly proved (for I admire the truthfulness and candor of the greater portion of the witnesses who have testified in this case)—had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends—either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class—and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.

This court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament. That teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me, further, to "remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them." I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done—as I have always freely admitted I have done—in behalf of His despised poor was not wrong, but right. 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!

Now it was the turn of the Transcendentalists to have their say, Thoreau as we have seen had already begun to praise Brown in his speeches, now Emerson, perhaps the pre-eminent American intellectual who was listened to, reprinted, and quoted ceaselessly by journals and other lecturers took up the gauntlet and began his defense of Brown. On November 8 Emerson spoke in the Music Hall in Boston to an overflow crowd. He started by saying the South no longer had a corner on courage, that Brown had shown, and continued to show himself to be a man of substance and unwilling to flinch even within sight of rope and hangman. Near the end of his speech he delivered the line that would follow Brown's memory throughout the 19th century, "That new saint, than whom none purer or more brave was ever led by love of men into conflict and death—the new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer, will make the gallows glorious like the cross." The phrase "gallows

glorious” still echoes, and in the heat of the trial and execution, it was restated, praised and reviled across the United States.

Brown was hung on the morning of December 2, 1859, in spite of numerous half-attempts at a rescue, including one by Lysander Spooner, the individualist anarchist, and only slightly less rabid an abolitionist than Brown. Brown’s wife collected the body and on the trip to North Elba New York, the Brown residence and base camp for over a decade she allowed one public viewing in New York City. Thousands lined up to see Captain Brown and the city, as would be seen in years to come, was deeply divided on slavery, the Republican Party, and this damn Brown fellow. Upon arrival home the family, in deep mourning for both the pater familias and the sons killed in the Harper’s Ferry action interred the body and purchased a headstone which still stands. Brown’s favorite hymn “Blow Ye the Trumpet Blow” was sung and fit perfectly with the man’s ideals, as it praises and celebrates the year of jubilee when all human government shall be destroyed and celebration, happiness and freedom will bless and exalt everyone.

#### Some Thoughts

The first striking thing about Brown and his life and times is the rather stark reality that the dominant system’s contention that terror is the last reserve of failed revolutionaries, and the mentally ill, is utterly proved wrong. Brown didn’t arrive at his own special form of insurrection as a result of a lifetime of failed uprisings, interminable meetings of the militants and factional battles. Rather he got there as a result of his observation and study of previous slave uprisings, in themselves bloody and vengeful—as they should be, and in response to the very real terror of pro-slavery forces, in Kansas, on the floor of the US Senate, and throughout the South. Therefore the upheaval that was the Civil War began with the terrorism, and concluded with full scale continent-wide belligerence. One is also reminded of the German guerrillas, the Rote Armee Faktion (RAF or Baader-Meinhof) and the June 2nd Movement (J2M) both of which attained their zenith of impact in the mid- 70’s. While most of the period of contestation in Germany was initiated by the riots surrounding the visit of the Shah of Iran to Berlin, and Bonn in which the police murdered a single demonstrator. Thereafter no significant mass movement rose to continue the work of propaganda and insurrection, rather a number of small networks of like-minded individuals came together and bombed, kidnapped, hijacked and bankrobbed their way through German society. In the end this led to the very real tottering of the German state, as when 1 in 3 persons canvassed indicated not only sympathy for the Baader Meinhof guerrillas, they also stated they would be willing to help them, if the chance came. The whole period culminates in the “Deutschland im Herbst” (Germany in the Fall) crisis where the passengers on a hijacked plane parked in Somalia are to be exchanged for the jailed Baader, Ensslin and others (Ulrike Meinhof had committed suicide in prison months prior to the crisis). The situation was resolved with either the suicide of the RAF militants in prison, or their murder, depending on who is writing the history. The fact remains, however, that the Maoist RAF, and the anarchist J2M presented for a year or so the example of a two miniscule guerrilla movements holding state-capitalist society effective hostage. Brown would have understood the dynamic, though the goal was beyond his time and place.

And then there are the Calvinists. For the Puritans, and one sees this in Cromwell and the regicides, the New Model Army, and many of the Ranters, Quakers, and others associated with the English Civil War and revolution, there was no higher law than conscience, and an innate sense of morality. All external law, which contradicted conscience, was taken as heretical, unworthy, and was ultimately to be ignored or overturned. One of the reasons the English revolutionaries pushed so hard was their complete faith in their own ability to perceive and translate the will of God into earthly reality. Here again, the Diggers, Ranters and Fifth Monarchy Men all sought to realize a heavenly utopia here and now, or then. Even the revolutionary Parliament was not immune and declared Jews, dissenters, and actors citizens. The same legislative body also suppressed the Church of England and sent Cromwell and the New Model Army to Ireland to slaughter and dispossess Catholics. Brown was clearly made of similar stuff, with his open tolerance of other faiths, and his bloody pronouncements concerning slaveholders, and the South generally.

Finally there is the project of seizing territory and declaring it free and no longer subject to the laws of the US. This action, close to my heart and mind always, speaks the loudest as to who Brown was and what he was capable of. Simple arithmetic that tells me that as Capital begins to grind to a halt as a result of failed market expansion and the concomitant loss of petroleum products and fuels due to the deliberate exhaustion of natural reserves, that somewhere, someone will raise a flag, shoot a few members of the local constabulary, and declare their intent to be free of the whole mess. Quite simply the freeing of those enslaved to the wage and it's twin, cultural insanity, is the next step in the process of Abolition, and one that we are coming closer and closer to realizing.

find each other.



Paul Z. Simons  
John Brown's Body  
150 years is a long time to moulder  
Spring 2012

Modern Slavery #1

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