

JOHN BROWN--THE LEGEND AND THE MAN

by

CLAIRE LARSON BEETCH

B. S., Mankato State Teachers College  
Mankato, Minnesota, 1950

---

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of English

KANSAS STATE COLLEGE  
OF AGRICULTURE AND APPLIED SCIENCE

1954

LD  
2668  
T4  
1954  
B44  
C.2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Documents

FRONTISPIECE.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
THE NORTHERN LEGEND (BROWN MAGNIFIED).....	3
While Brown Lived.....	3
After His Execution.....	4
BROWN'S INFLUENCE IN NEW ENGLAND AND THE LEGEND.....	19
Emerson.....	21
Thoreau.....	25
Alcott.....	32
Parker.....	36
Phillips.....	43
Beecher.....	50
THE LEGEND AND JOHN BROWN IN LITERATURE.....	56
THE SOUTHERN LEGEND (AN ATTACK ON BROWN).....	65
The Southern Legend.....	67
An Impartial View.....	72
An Attack on Brown.....	73
Did Brown Defend and Aid Kansas?.....	77
Did He Lead Raids Against Pro-slavery Men?.....	91
Was Harper's Ferry Impetus to Civil War?.....	92
Was Brown Willing to Risk His Life?.....	93
THE MAN WITH ASPIRATIONS AND WEAKNESSES.....	100
THE MAN AND THE LEGEND.....	108
The Actor.....	108
The Man Magnified.....	109

The Man Magnified Into a Hero and a Legend.....	113
ACKNOWLEDGMENT.....	117
LITERATURE CITED.....	118



## INTRODUCTION

The excitement, realism, romance, and hardship of the Civil War become vicarious experiences through Paul Gregor's unique production of John Brown's Body on the stage. Reading Stephen Vincent Benet's volume of narrative verse, from which the stage show was taken, made the historical and fictional characters become real people like the neighbor down the street and the new political figure in Washington, D. C. Because Benet used John Brown as the unifying theme of his poem, more should be known about this figure vaguely connected with Harper's Ferry and Kansas. Sanborn's biography and Hubbard's novel revealed a terrible saint who fought by the command of the Holy Word, a martyr who died for the freedom of slaves and a hero who hastened the conflict over slavery--the Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

However, the rose-tinted view faded somewhat before Allen Tate's disparaging review of John Brown's Body. Although Tate was a member of the so-called Agrarian Group of Southern writers and political theorists and admittedly is partial to the Southern viewpoint, his comments cannot be disregarded:

The symbol of John Brown becomes an incentive to some misty writing, and...Mr. Benet sees that the meaning of the war is related to meaning of Brown; yet what is the meaning of Brown? The presentation of Brown as a character is interesting, but it is neither here nor there to say, symbolically, that he is a "stone" or, at the end, that the

---

<sup>1</sup>F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown; Elbert Hubbard, Time and Chance, A Romance and a History: Being the Story of the Life of a Man.

machino-age grows out of his body.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase 'He is a stone' appears in Benet in Books I and VIII:

He was a stone, this man who lies so still,  
A stone flung from a sling against a wall,  
A sacrificial instrument of kill.<sup>2</sup>

The comparison to the machine age is found in Book VIII:

Out of his body grows revolving steel,  
Out of his body grows the spinning wheel  
Made up of wheels, the mechanic birth.<sup>3</sup>

Why question the symbol of John Brown as Tate does? Why not accept the popularly-accepted folk legend of John Brown's spirit? Everyone knows the old, familiar refrain sung to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave..." Poets and writers in general seem to have recognized John Brown as a heroic figure, almost a prophet of the Civil War; Benet built his entire narrative around this symbol.

In this thesis the symbol of John Brown and the Legend built around his name by the North will be shown. Because John Brown's personality and oratory greatly swayed many prominent men of the East--writers, preachers, politicians, inventors, philanthropists --his influence on certain literary figures of New England will be investigated, and some examples from the vast amount of literature written around the John Brown theme will be given. An attempt will be made to show why the Legend should not be accepted as history by disclosing documentary evidence to the contrary. Out of extreme attacks upon the man the Southern Legend developed, to which some

---

<sup>1</sup>Allen Tate, "The Irrepressible Conflict," The Nation, September 19, 1928, 127:274.

<sup>2</sup>Stephen Vincent Benet, John Brown's Body, p. 334.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 335.

attention will be given. Finally, a possible explanation for John Brown the man and the Legend will be advanced.

#### THE NORTHERN LEGEND (BROWN MAGNIFIED)

First of all, what is the Northern Legend or myth that has enveloped John Brown and is generally recognized by the average layman today? It is the Legend of John Brown as the hero of Kansas --and especially Osawatomie, the liberator of slaves, and the martyr of the Abolitionists.

#### While Brown Lived

Even before Brown's execution by the state of Virginia on December 2, 1859, the eulogizing of Brown had begun. It was found among the contemporary philosophers and writers who ordinarily stayed out of the political spotlight. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who met Brown twice at Concord, spoke of him on November 8 as "the saint whose life yet hangs in the balance, but whose martyrdom, if it shall be perfected, will make the gallows glorious like the cross." The New York Daily Tribune quoted this lecture on "Courage" as it was first given in Boston.<sup>1</sup> The above quotation does not appear in Emerson's complete works. Another literary personage, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, entered this in his diary on the day of execution, December 2:

This will be a great day in our history; the date of a new Revolution,--quite as much needed as the old one. Even

---

<sup>1</sup>Ralph L. Rusk, The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 402.

now as I write, they are leading old John Brown to execution in Virginia for attempting to rescue slaves: This is sowing the wind to reap the whirlwind, which will come soon.<sup>1</sup>

#### After His Execution

Various funeral discourses and eulogies enlarged upon the hero, after his death on the gallows. In a funeral sermon preached at Roxbury on December 4, The Rev. Fales Henry Newhall boldly expounded and implied the parallelism of John Brown and Christianity, as shown in this extraction:

The execution of John Brown sets forth in bold, clear relief the moral conflict between Christianity and American Slavery. The smouldering fires carefully trodden down for years and generations, here burst forth in a volcano blaze, that rises as if to "lick the stars." There is a shaking of statesmen and States over all the nation, a throbbing of telegraphic wires from centre to circumference, a swaying to and fro of vast populations, a rushing of armed squadrons along the national highways, and all to tread down that flame that comes roaring "up from the burning core below."<sup>2</sup>

And The Rev. S. H. Taft, pastor of the Church of Martinsburg, New York, further eulogized the hero on December 12 in his sermon. In the following excerpt, he magnified Brown's "notability" to the height of exaggeration:

His example of courage and faith is almost without a parallel. His letters, his conversation, and his personal demeanor, bear witness to a moral character so high and grand that common men, compared with him in respect to all noble and moral qualities, seem scarcely more than children. No man has ever produced upon this nation so profound an impression for moral heroism. He made this impression at the first, but every act he performed, and every word he uttered until the day of his execution, only confirmed and increased

---

<sup>1</sup>Samuel Longfellow, Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow With Extracts from his Journals and Correspondence, Vol. II., p. 396.

<sup>2</sup>Fales Henry Newhall, The Conflict in America, p. 1.



the power of his example. He grew greater and greater unto the end. He was greatest at the last, when most men would have been weakest.<sup>1</sup>

In Redpath's Version. The Legend, growing out of this hero-worship, began crystallizing in the first biography of Brown by James Redpath. As a correspondent from the East, Redpath came to Kansas in 1856 to obtain news "copy" to satisfy New England readers who had heard rumors about the Kansas struggle. Having heard much about Brown, the "earnest...and devout Christian," Redpath eagerly sought out his camp (as Brown and his band were hiding out after the recent murders at Pottawatomie).<sup>2</sup> The budding journalist related in his own words his first meeting with his hero:

I shall not soon forget the scene that here opened to my view....In an open space, amid the shady and lofty woods, there was a great blazing fire....Old Brown himself stood near the fire, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up....He was poorly clad, and his toes protruded from his boots. The old man received me with great cordiality....

In this camp no manner of profane language was permitted; no man of immoral character was allowed to stay, excepting as a prisoner of war. He made prayers in which all the company united, every morning and evening and no food was ever tasted by his men until the Divine blessing had been asked on it....Often, I was told, the old man would retire to the densest solitudes, to wrestle with his God in secret prayer. ...After these retirings, he would say that the Lord had directed him in visions what to do; that, for himself, he did not love warfare, but peace,--only acting in obedience to the will of the Lord, and fighting God's battles for His children's sake.

I left this sacred spot with a far higher respect for the Great Struggle than ever I had felt before, and with a renewed and increased faith in noble and disinterested champions of the right; of whose existence--since I had seen so much of paltry jealousy, selfishness, and unprincipled

---

<sup>1</sup>S. H. Taft, A Discourse on the Character and Death of John Brown, pp. 22-23.

<sup>2</sup>James Redpath, The Public Life of Capt. John Brown, p. 104.

ambition among the Free State politicians--I was beginning to doubt, and to regard as a pleasant illusion of my youth. ...I had seen the predestined leader of the second and the holier American Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

One can readily see how the young, emotional Redpath was easily swayed. This temperament was early expressed in the preface to his biography, for he declared:

I have written this book, because I could not resist it. ...I think that John Brown did right in invading Virginia and greater reverence than Congress, and His holy laws than its enactments. I would as soon think of vindicating Washington for resisting the British Government to the death, as to apologize for John Brown in assailing the Slave Power with the only weapons that it fears.<sup>2</sup>

The above eulogizing continued throughout this volume. In narrating the court trial of Brown, Redpath pondered over Brown's wide-spreading influence against such laws as the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Its author, Daniel Webster, was present at the trial, and Redpath's thoughts were directed to him:

Did he know that he was witnessing the beginning of the end of the rule of the wicked Power that he represents? Did he think that the wounded old man on the pallet was undermining, with his every groan and breath, the foundations of Human Slavery in America?...John Brown embodied the Northern religious anti-slavery idea.<sup>3</sup>

And as the "mournful procession moved off" after Brown's execution, according to the vivid imagination of Redpath,

....there was another procession at the moment--unseen by the Virginians: a procession of earth's holiest martyrs before the Throne of God: and from among them came a voice, which said:

"Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom pre-

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 112-114.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 308.

pared for you from the foundations of the world....Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of those my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

The soul of John Brown stood at the right hand of the Eternal. He had fought the good fight, and now wore the crown of victory.<sup>1</sup>

In The Song. Today the John Brown song is an old favorite. If nothing else is known about Brown, at least his body "lies a-mouldering in the grave." Here facts are stranger than fiction, for it became popular as a Civil War marching song after being copyrighted July 16, 1861. However, Brown fell heir to another man's fame; a Massachusetts private at Fort Warren also had the name John Brown. The most fully authenticated version of the song's origin is that this John Brown was in the second battallion of the Massachusetts infantry, and "Say, brothers, will you join us?" was one of the camp tunes. This Brown was the object of many jokes such as his being dead and his body mouldering in the grave. Thus the words became associated with the tune, and the song was born.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because Brown of Fort Warren was not publicized for any spectacular incident and Brown of Harper's Ferry was, the public made the song just another part of the Legend.

Nevertheless, not all contemporaries "hopped on the Brown bandwagon." Malin cited an editorial found in the Illinois Weekly Mirror at Mt. Carroll, August 6, 1862. Its editor believed the verdict of the Virginia jury to be just and right; yet he realized the effect of such a popular song, glorifying the traitor to the United States government:

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 404.

<sup>2</sup>George Kimball, "Origin of the John Brown Song," New England Magazine, December, 1889, New Series 1; 271-377.

The apotheosis of old John Brown is fast taking place. Someone has said: "Permit me to write the songs of a people, and you may make its laws." The utterance is true. The living sentiment that inspires a people finds expression in song....

Kind and sympathetic feelings towards the old hero... are now animating the masses of our people when they sing the old John Brown song....It is the pet song among the soldiers in all our armies; more than a thousand verses have been composed and sung to the tune of old John Brown's soul is marching....This is the reason that the apotheosis is set to music, and sung by millions in the land--millions whom no one ever charged with being Abolitionists.<sup>1</sup>

The Legend "is marching on." Well-meaning friends and admirers of Brown wrote articles for magazines and newspapers accepting and repeating Redpath's supposed facts. No other book-size biography was published until 1885, and "what was there to prevent the Redpath version from exercising a major influence in moulding the Brown Legend during the first twenty-five years?"<sup>2</sup>

In Sanborn's Biography. Sanborn's biography of 1885 "moulded" the Legend even more. A graduate of Harvard, 1855, Sanborn was an extreme Abolitionist who needed a hero to represent his cause. John Brown became the hero. Meeting Brown in 1857, the youth soon pledged his loyalty, becoming one of the "secret six" in the Kansas work which ended disastrously at Harper's Ferry.<sup>3</sup> Previous to the publishing of his biography, he had rushed in to defend the late hero whenever the latter's name was being stained. A series of articles appeared in The Atlantic Monthly in 1875, and his volume defended Brown even more vigorously. Profound were his phrases which guarded and deified his hero's name:

---

<sup>1</sup>James C. Malin, John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six, p. 308.  
<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 306.  
<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 344.

The story of John Brown will mean little to those who do not believe that God governs the world, and that He makes His will known in advance to certain chosen men and women who perform it, consciously or unconsciously. Of such prophetic, Heaven-appointed men John Brown was the most conspicuous in our time, and his life must be construed in the light of the fact.<sup>1</sup>

Admitting his hero had "approved" the Pottawatomie massacre committed in Kansas, which few previous admirers had dared to do, he hastened to concede that "such a deed must not be judged by the every-day rules of conduct, which distinctly forbid violence and the infliction of death for private causes."<sup>2</sup> And overcome with the righteousness of the massacre, he even dared to envision the future of Kansas and the future of the United States in the palm of Brown's hand, for "upon the swift and secret vengeance of John Brown in that midnight raid hinged the future of Kansas, as we can see," and on that future "again hinged the destinies of the whole country."<sup>3</sup> Sanborn expressed this idea still further in his conclusion, going so far as to compare Brown with Socrates:

The achievement and death of John Brown made future compromises between slavery and freedom impossible. What he did in Kansas for a single State, he did in Virginia for the whole nation,--nay, for the whole world.

It has been sometimes asked in what way Brown performed this great work for the world, since he won no battle, headed no party, repealed no law, and could not even save his own life from an ignominious penalty. In this respect he resembled Socrates, whose position in the world's history is yet fairly established.<sup>4</sup>

The Legend marches on, increases, and even grows out of

---

<sup>1</sup>Sanborn, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 631.

bounds; nevertheless "John Brown is yet to be fully appreciated," one reverent admirer asserted in 1893.<sup>1</sup> Another believed that "from boyhood days John Brown had been planning how he could help the slaves."<sup>2</sup> The land in the heart of the Adirondack region offered by Gerrit Smith furthered this plan, for there Brown could assist the colored colony set up by Smith:

Immediately he began to assist them by surveying their land, teaching them habits of industry and thrift, and even buying provisions and clothes for the most needy. He worked in every way for their rights.<sup>3</sup>

Sanborn and Redpath had hinted at the illusion that Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry was the impetus of the war over slavery. Words of Frederick Douglass, a Negro orator and another friend of Brown, added force to this illusion--another part of the Legend. In a commencement address, 1882, Douglas informed listeners that

.....if John Brown did not end the war that ended slavery, he did at least begin the war that ended slavery. If we look over the dates, places, and men for which this honor is claimed, we shall find that not Carolina, but Virginia, not Fort Sumter, but Harper's Ferry, and the United States Arsenal--not Major Anderson, but John Brown began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic. Until this blow was struck, the prospect for Freedom was dim, shadowy, and uncertain. The irrepressible conflict was one of words, votes, and compromises. When John Brown stretched forth his arm the sky was cleared--the time for compromise was gone--the armed hosts stood face to face over the chasm of a broken Union and the clash of arms was at hand.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Robert Shackleton, Jr., "What Support Did John Brown Rely upon?" Magazine of American History, April, 1893, 29:348.

<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Porter Gould, "John Brown at North Elba," Outlook, November 21, 1896, 54:910:

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 910.

<sup>4</sup>Richard J. Hinton, John Brown and His Men, With Some Account of the Roads They Traveled to Reach Harper's Ferry, pp. 581-582.

In Hinton's Biography. Richard J. Hinton first came to Kansas in 1856 and was one of the old her's associates. Called "irresponsible" by Malin and "inexact" by C. W. Brown, he had an active imagination in accounting the life of Brown in his biography of 1894.<sup>1</sup> When dealing with the Pottawatomie Massacre, Hinton admitted that his hero had directed the murders. "It was a question for some years whether or not the act was done under the influence of, and by the direct orders of John Brown. No one now doubts that it was."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Hinton hurriedly vindicated his hero by concluding:

For himself, while never acknowledging participation in the Pottawatomie slaying, he never denied it either. He always declared, however, that, as he avowed a belief in its righteousness, he could not, therefore, avoid a personal responsibility for the deed. This has been the attitude of every honorable free-state man in Kansas.<sup>3</sup>

He echoed the previously mentioned Illinois Weekly Mirror editorial on the John Brown song and magnified the deification, thus adding even more to the Legend:

"His soul went marching on." At the head of battling armies, in the uproar of hilarious camps, amid the solemn savagery of the battle shock, flaming with its mighty "Hallelujah Chorus" through all the thundering octaves of embattled conflict. It was the sign of human devotion, the unbridled recognition of courage blent and blending with lofty conviction....It was the anthem of reverence, the choral shout of defiance, the jubilee of victory. John Brown's work was still a-doing.<sup>4</sup>

As for Brown's part in the Civil War, he "shivered the walls of

---

<sup>1</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 450; C. W. Brown, False Claims of Kansas Historians Truthfully Corrected, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup>Hinton, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 37-38.

slavery" in Hinton's estimation. The superior services of Brown easily surpassed those of the great men of the nation; Hinton's John Brown was put on a pedestal--opposite John C. Calhoun and slavery:

When the Missouri compromise was passed and the State (Kansas) came into the Union, there came into manhood a man whose name, not perhaps in power of intellect, must, in character and in earnestness of purpose, be regarded as the opposite of Calhoun. It is that of a man whose single act (Harper's Ferry) shivered the walls of slavery, so that the citadel parted from rampart to foundation, and the marching hosts of the North went through. It was John Brown, born in Torrington Conn., but hero of Kansas and Harper's Ferry. I take John Brown to represent as faithfully the real Northern idea as John Caldwell Calhoun did that of the slaveocracy and its expansionists.<sup>1</sup>

In Connelley's Biography. The Legend "marched on" as William Elsey Connelley added his name to the list of Brown eulogists in 1900. His biography was written under the editorial supervision of W. M. Davidson, superintendent of the public schools of Topeka, Kansas. Connelley stressed principally Brown's services and resulting "honor" in Kansas:

The people of Kansas honor the memory of the old hero who without money and without price, at the peril of his life and the sacrifice of his son, alone of the leaders of the people, ranged the land and entreated the harried and discouraged settlers to continue the fight for freedom till help should come....His fame was great. Pottawatomie and Osawatomie were talked of in every ruffian camp, and the terror of the name of Old John Brown increased all along the border. He believed himself raised up of God to break the jaws of the wicked.<sup>2</sup>

Connelley showered his own praises upon the memory of this "Kansas

---

<sup>1</sup>Martin, Geo. W., ed., Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1897-1900, Vol. VI., p. 181.

<sup>2</sup>William Elsey Connelley, John Brown, Vol. II., p. 196.



hero," letting no limitations stand in his way to dim Brown's glory:

He cared nothing for law when it stood in the way of right and humanity. He was a revolutionist as were the fathers of 1776. He was the oracle of the doctrine enunciated in the Declaration of Independence. He believed it agreed perfectly with the Sermon on the Mount, and he believed that it were better that his generation perish than that a syllable of either should fail. Only such men are truly great.<sup>1</sup>

Noteworthy were his declarations on Brown's principal act in Kansas--the Pottawatomie Massacre. First of all, he asked, in a Sanborn tone, that any

. . . historical character be judged by the times in which he lived. A few men have done John Brown the injustice to try him by the conditions existing today (1900). Others have tried him by the conditions existing in his own time in New England, where no danger ever threatened anyone.<sup>2</sup>

Connelley agreed that Brown had a role in the massacre; almost paradoxical was his "forward" admittance that "from the very day after the men were killed on the Pottawatomie there was never any doubt in the vicinity as to who had killed them." He continued:

The members of the party never made a secret of the matter, nor of their participation in the killing. John Brown always declared that they were killed by his order, but said he had not killed any of them himself.<sup>3</sup>

A paradox this is, if the positive denials of Redpath and Sanborn are to be considered. Here again Connelley had a rebuttal, for "the denials attributed to him are the work of Mr. Redpath principally, and always did Brown an injustice; they were made with-

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>2</sup>William Elsey Connelley, John Brown, Vol. I., pp. 94-95.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

out his knowledge or consent."<sup>1</sup>

The Pottawatomie incident, in Connelley's words, saved Kansas--and the nation--from the "fatal coils" of slavery. This was the opportunity Brown was waiting for; he came to Kansas to strike against slavery, which he did:

Who sees no more in this raid on the Pottawatomie than the mere protection of a few families, (though as a matter of justification, that was for it a sufficient cause,) has read the history of his country in vain. While it was indeed that, it was primarily much more than that: it was a blow against slavery in America....If freedom's cause had failed in Kansas, the conflict would have been delayed and a future generation would have been compelled to battle with greater difficulties.<sup>2</sup>

In Kansas. In the same vein as Connelley's estimation of Brown as the hero of Kansas, The Nation reported a semi-centennial celebration in Kansas in 1906 of the Osawatomie Battle. According to Connelley and The Nation, Brown was an accepted hero in Kansas, for "according to those who took part in the Kansas celebration, Osawatomie was one of the world's important battles which brought Appomattox in its train as surely as Yorktown followed Bunker Hill." Furthermore, in 1877 a marble monument was erected at Osawatomie in

. . .commemoration of the heroism of Capt. John Brown, who commanded at the battle of Osawatomie, August 30, 1856, who died and conquered American slavery at Charlestown, Va., December 2, 1859.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that in 1906--and perhaps even today--numerous natives preserved his memory and enlarged on the legendary deeds (helped

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>3</sup>"John Brown Fifty Years After Osawatomie," The Nation, September 6, 1906, 83:194.

by Connelley and others), as if Brown were Kansas-born and Kansas-bred. At least, that is the opinion of a profeseor of government and history at Ottawa University, Samuel Le Page.<sup>1</sup> Recorded were the names of a few people still living (in 1928) who remembered John Brown. Mrs. Willis of Ottawa, Kansas, recalled that her grandmother had seen the little lean-to kitchen of the old Adair homestead (Adair being an uncle of Brown and his home a headquarters for Brown when he was not in hiding or out roaming) filled with slaves who were secretly smuggled out of the territory. In fact "Miami County has taken more pride in her claims to distinction," for this same home was moved to the area which was originally the Osawatomie battleground and was dedicated as a park in 1910. This is a "veritable John Brown shrine." Le Page also mentioned the John Brown monument near the house "erected to the memory of the one who did so much for Kansas."<sup>2</sup> Le Page added his name to the list of Brown eulogists also; his commendations had the Redpath-Sanborn tone toward John Brown, the bold prophet, who "hastened the inevitable conflict between the North and the South." However, sad is the fact that he does not occupy a larger place in the community where he labored. But then, a prophet is not without honor, save in his own country."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, even though proclaimed a hero by many Kansans, Brown's

---

<sup>1</sup>Samuel M. Le Page, "Memories of John Brown of Osawatomie," Current History, June, 1928, 28:428-430.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 428-430.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 430.

honor may have become rather tarnished in his own community.

In The Brown Family. The Legend was, of course, developed further by the Brown family, especially in later years. As late as 1909, recollections of John Brown, Jr. were recorded. By 1913 only Salmon Brown survived of the many Brown children. When he was in a reminiscent mood, a daughter listened while Salmon spoke and compiled the recollections for publication. Both John and Salmon confirmed the legend of the secret oath taken against slavery by all members of the family. In Salmon's words:

My early recollections of my father have to do with his hatred of slavery, his hatred for everything that would take from one man a single right and give to his fellow even a petty advantage.<sup>1</sup>

John even recalled the year, 1838, when his father revealed his "purpose" to the family:

My young step-mother was under twenty-five, I think, with four babies around her knees, when my father told her and us that he would never again engage in any business that he could not leave on two weeks' notice....It might be years before opportunity offered to strike the blow, but he meant to prepare for it, and when the "call" came, his wife was to consider herself a widow, his children committed to the care of Him who fed the ravens....<sup>2</sup>

This family covenant existed secretly within the family for twenty-one years then--the covenant to break the power of slavery, or, in the words of the Old Hero, "This was all settled millions of years before the world was made."<sup>3</sup> The feelings and attitudes

<sup>1</sup>Salmon Brown, "My Father, John Brown," Outlook, January 25, 1913, 103:212.

<sup>2</sup>Eleanor Atkinson, "The Soul of John Brown," American Magazine, October, 1909, 68:636.

<sup>3</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emerson's Complete Works, Vol. III., pp. 278-279.

of the Browns in regard to their father and husband were implied by Salmon, who felt no apology was needed for his father:

With nearly all my brothers and sisters gone to their reward, many of them before the Nation realized the importance of father's work, with more than half a century intervening since the tragedy at Harper's Ferry, during which time public judgment had calmed and changed materially, I feel that no apology is needed on behalf of John Brown, husband and father kind and true, however much some may still doubt the saneness of his work for the abolition of that horrible National curse, slavery.<sup>1</sup>

In Villard's Biography. Later biographers included Oswald Garrison Villard, 1910. For the first time, a seemingly impartial volume was published, although Malin, the historian thought that "the more closely one studies his book the more conspicuous become the contradictions in it."<sup>2</sup> However, Villard's sympathies were with Brown much of the time as is readily seen in his closing chapter:

Not often in history is there recorded such a rise to spiritual greatness of one whose hands were so stained with blood, whose judgment was ever so faulty, whose public career was so brief. John Brown is and must remain a great and lasting figure in American history....It was the weapon of the spirit by which he finally conquered. In its power lies not only the secret of his influence and his immortality, but the finest ethical teachings of a life, which, for all its faults, inculcates many an enduring lesson and will forever make its appeal to the imagination.<sup>3</sup>

Even though he realized John Brown was a traitor after Harper's Ferry, when judged by normal legal and moral standards, Villard saw him as the "man on the scaffold sacrificing, not taking life, who inspired." Brown will remain an inspiration whenever there

---

<sup>1</sup>Brown, op. cit., p. 217.

<sup>2</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 478.

<sup>3</sup>Oswald Garrison Villard, John Brown 1800-1859, A Biography Fifty Years After, p. 588.

is revolt against injustice and oppression, in Villard's estimation:

The story of John Brown will ever confront the spirit of despotism, when men are struggling to throw off the shackles of social or political or physical slavery. His own country, while admitting his mistakes without undue palliation or excuse, will forever acknowledge the divine that was in him by the side of what was human and faulty, and blind and wrong. It will cherish the memory of the prisoner of Charlestown in 1859 as at once a sacred, a solemn and an inspiring American heritage.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the Legend became established and was blown up way out of proportions--almost to Paul Bunyan size! In fact, Artemus Ward, a noted folklore writer, humorously did just that.--Brown could lick "nine Border ruffians, four bears, six injuns and a brace of bull pups."--The entire description, though far from being authentic, is delightful:

He is a medium sized, compactly-built and wiry man, as quick as a cat in his movements. His hair is of a salt and pepper hue and as stiff as bristles; he has a long, waving, milk white goatee which gives him a somewhat patriarchal appearance. A man of pluck, is Brown. You may bet on that. He shows it in his walk, talk, and actions. He must be rising sixty and yet we believe he could lick a yardful of wild cats before breakfast and without taking off his coat. Turn him into a ring with nine Border ruffians, four bears, six injuns and a brace of bull pups and we opine that "The eagles of victory would perch on his banner." We don't mean by this that he looks like a professional bruiser, who hits from the shoulder, but he looks like a man of iron and one that few men would like to "sail into."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 589.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Penn Warren, John Brown, The Making of a Martyr, p. 310.

## BROWN'S INFLUENCE IN NEW ENGLAND AND THE LEGEND

Desiring to meet the New England poets, writers, thinkers and financiers who leaned toward Abolitionism, John Brown went East from Kansas in January of 1857. He was so successful in obtaining good will and solicitations that he returned to Concord and Boston in the spring of 1859. Among those whom he met were men reluctant to leave their secluded cloisters to voice opinions on political questions. Even more reluctant were they to open their purses to "just any appeal." Yet Brown saw many doors and purses opened whole-heartedly. Eminent literary men--Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott--were duly impressed by Brown's eloquence and appearance. Notable clergymen and orators--Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips, and Henry Ward Beecher--added their weight to his appeals for Kansas and slavery.

Committees all over the East already were raising funds to assist emigrants to Kansas and to assist the Free State cause. Brown's purpose seemed to be to solicit funds from these committees personally upon his own account as the hero of bloody Kansas.<sup>1</sup>

Several letters of introduction were collected by Brown as he came East. One was from Salmon P. Chase, governor of Ohio and an Abolitionist; it was addressed to F. B. Sanborn, one of

---

<sup>1</sup>Leland H. Jenks, "The John Brown Myth," American Mercury, March 1924, 1:270.

the "lesser lights of the 'Concord crowd.'"<sup>1</sup> This was of value to Brown, for Sanborn was respected and popular as a Concord schoolmaster. As Alcott recorded in his Journal on June 9, 1859, "Sanborn is...a scholar. He is sensible and manly and commands the respect of all who know him....I think he is brave, and likely to do good service for freedom if necessary."<sup>2</sup> Through him, Brown was able to meet some of the wisest minds in the country. However, Brown was not above being his own press agent, also. The following draft of a letter written in his hand introducing him to antislavery men was later found among his papers by Sanborn himself:

This will introduce a friend who visits (Worcester) in order to secure means to sustain and further the cause of freedom in the United States and in all the world. In behalf of this cause he has so far exhausted his own limited means as to place his wife and three young daughters in circumstances of privation and of dependence upon the generosity of their friends, who have cared for them. He has contributed the entire services of two strong minor sons for two years, and of himself for more than three years, during which time they have all endured great hardships, exposure of health, and other privations. During much of the past three years (1856-1858) he had with him in Kansas six sons and a son-in-law, who, together with himself, were all sick; two were made prisoners, and subjected to most barbarous treatment; two were severely wounded, and one murdered. During this time he figured with some success under the title of 'Old Brown', often perilling his life in company with his sons and son-in-law, who all shared these trials with him. His object is commended to the best feelings of yourself and all who love liberty and equal rights in (Massachusetts), and himself indorsed as an earnest and steady-minded man, and a true descendent of Peter Brown, one of the "Mayflower" Pilgrims.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>David Karsner, John Brown, Terrible 'Saint', p. 214.

<sup>2</sup>Odell Shepart, ed., The Journals of Bronson Alcott, p. 317.

<sup>3</sup>Sanborn, op. cit., p. 511.



## Emerson

"Old Brown had a strange power of making" other "people believe what he said."<sup>1</sup> Emerson, the profound philosopher of Concord, was one of those who believed.

Once preferring to remain on the sidelines as a poet and thinker, Emerson found himself expressing his views on slavery (the common interest between the two men) more and more. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was the spark that ignited Emerson's growing anti-slavery attitude. This law made every man in Massachusetts liable to official summons if he did not aid the return of escaped slaves from the South. On May 3, 1851, Emerson accepted the invitation to address the residents of Concord on this law because

. . .I have lived all my life in this State, and never had any experience of personal inconvenience from the laws until now....But the Act of Congress of September 18, 1850, is a law that every one of you will break on the earliest occasion,--a law which no man can obey or abet the obeying without loss of self-respect and forfeiture of the name of a gentlemen.<sup>2</sup>

Western lecture journeys enabled him to learn more about the Kansas-Nebraska struggle, and he became intensely interested in the affairs of Kansas. Therefore when John Brown appeared in Concord as the courageous frontiersman fighting for Kansas and against slavery, he was royally entertained in Emerson's home. Emerson's diary for February, 1857, included this notation:

---

<sup>1</sup>Warren, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup>James Elliot Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 578.

Captain John Brown of Kansas gave a good account of himself in the Town Hall last night to a meeting of citizens. One of his good points was the folly of the peace part in Kansas, who believed that their strength lay in the greatness of their wrongs, and so discountenanced resistance....The first man who went into Kansas from Missouri to interfere in the elections, he thought, "had a perfect right to be shot."<sup>1</sup>

It would appear then that Emerson approved the doctrine of armed resistance to slavery men on the frontier, and that Brown's self-same doctrine increased his popularity with Emerson. Alcott recorded Brown's reappearance at the Concord Town Hall in 1859 and Emerson's presence at the meeting.<sup>2</sup>

Brown's raid upon Harper's Ferry and his resulting execution touched Emerson deeply. He wrote to William, his brother in New York, "the sad Harper's Ferry business...interests us all who had Brown for our guest twice....He is a true hero, but lost his head there."<sup>3</sup> Three days later, October 26, 1859, he spoke of Brown as a "hero of romance" who "seems to have made this fatal blunder only to bring out his virtues. I must hope for his escape to the last moment."<sup>4</sup>

In numerous lectures and essays, Emerson requested aid for Brown's family and openly championed the martyr's cause. His remarks at the meeting held for the relief of the family in Tremont Temple, Boston, on November 18, 1859, are often quoted:

---

<sup>1</sup>Bliss Perry, ed., The Heart of Emerson's Journals, p. 277.

<sup>2</sup>Shepard, op. cit., p. 315.

<sup>3</sup>Ralph L. Rusk, ed., The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. V., p. 178.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

For himself, he is so transparent that all men see him through. He is a man to make friends wherever on earth courage and integrity are esteemed--the rarest of heroes, a pure idealist, with no by-ends of his own....He believes in two articles--two instruments shall I say?--the Golden Rule and the Declaration of Independence;--and he used this expression in conversation here concerning them, "Better that a whole generation of men, women, and children should pass away by a violent death, than that one word of either should be violated in this country."<sup>1</sup>

In Brown, Emerson thought he had discovered the man--the living force--to represent the Abolitionist cause, and he was willing to accept what he felt and heard without questioning his hero's actions. He also recognized the universal appeal of the Brown story and the Legend which grew around it; this, he was sure, would be a favorite with history:

This commanding event, which has brought us together...eclipses all others which have occurred for a long time in our history, and I am very glad to see that this sudden interest in the hero of Harper's Ferry has provoked an extreme curiosity in all parts of the Republic, in regard to the details of his history. Every anecdote is eagerly sought, and I do not wonder that gentlemen find traits of relation readily between him and themselves. One finds a relation in the church, another in the profession, another in the place of his birth. He was happily a representative of the American Republic.<sup>2</sup>

Eloquent statements of Brown's saintly qualities may be read in Emerson's essays on "Courage" and "Eloquence," his lecture on "Memory," and "Abraham Lincoln," all found in Emerson's complete works.

Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address was compared to Brown's court speech in remarks made at the funeral services for Lincoln

---

<sup>1</sup>Emerson, op. cit., p. 268.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

held in Concord, April 19, 1865.

His brief speech at Gettysburg will not easily be surpassed by words on any recorded occasion. This, and one other American speech, that of John Brown to the court that tried him, and a part of Kossuth's speech at Birmingham, can only be compared with each other, and with no fourth.<sup>1</sup>

Emerson was inspired by his saint's court speech, for he considered the speeches of John Brown and Abraham Lincoln "the two best specimens of eloquence we have had in this country" in his essay on "Eloquence."<sup>2</sup> The question arises whether this comparison is relevant. "Will the historian accept Mr. Emerson's comparison of this exhibit of Brown's prevarication, with the immortal words of the immortal Lincoln?"<sup>3</sup> This is only partially answered by replying that perhaps he was "right on the matter of rhetoric."<sup>4</sup>

Emerson attempted to sketch briefly Brown's life in a speech at Salem on January 6, 1860; however the facts were some of Brown's own stories first used for advertising. And Emerson believed Brown and "let him speak for himself."<sup>5</sup> Unfortunate it was that Emerson was influenced; as a result of later lectures his reputation as a John Brown sympathizer forced him to give up the lecture stands in Philadelphia where he was not wanted.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>2</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emerson's Complete Works, Vol. I., p. 125.

<sup>3</sup>Hill Peebles Wilson, John Brown Soldier of Fortune, a Critique, p. 380.

<sup>4</sup>Warren, op. cit., p. 414.

<sup>5</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emerson's Complete Works, Vol. III., p. 277.

<sup>6</sup>Ralph L. Rusk, The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 403.

## Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau was another of Brown's devoted Concord admirers. He, too, vigorously defended Brown after the Harper's Ferry raid. Both Emerson and Thoreau, by their eloquent assertions of Brown's saintliness, "undoubtedly contributed much to the making of the Brown legend."<sup>1</sup> Even Villard admitted that "like Theodore Parker's, their support of him became of enormous value in 1859, in shaping the judgment of the time upon John Brown."<sup>2</sup> Thus the Legend marched on, aided in part by two prominent literary men of the day.

One of his biographers asserted that "Thoreau was never an Abolitionist, although at last, and somewhat reluctantly, he associated himself with the Abolitionist organization."<sup>3</sup> However, all the members of his family read The Liberator, an active anti-slavery paper edited by William Lloyd Garrison, and the women at least "talked Abolition incessantly."<sup>4</sup>

Thoreau may not have been a staunch Abolitionist, but he had long advocated resistance to a government he did not approve of. His resistance was not violence but non-participation to the point of refusing to pay taxes. For this, he was "imprisoned"

---

<sup>1</sup>Gilman M. Ostrander, "Emerson, Thoreau, and John Brown," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, March 1953, 39:713.

<sup>2</sup>Villard, op. cit., p. 273.

<sup>3</sup>Henry Seidel Canby, Thoreau, p. 383.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 383.

one night and humorously and unconcernedly satirized this event in his essay, "Civil Disobedience," 1846:

I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar....When I was let out the next morning, I proceeded to finish my errand, and, having put on my mended shoe, joined a huckleberry party...and in half an hour,...the State was nowhere to be seen.<sup>1</sup>

(A well-wishing friend had paid the tax.) As for Thoreau's not meeting his obligations to the government, "it is for no particular item in the tax-bill that I refuse to pay it. I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually."<sup>2</sup> Government, to Thoreau, would be "that government...which governs not at all."<sup>3</sup> Since he was an individualist in many ways, Thoreau was rather indifferent about government and political questions in 1846. "The government does not concern me much....If a man is thought-free, fancy-free, imagination-free,...unwise rulers or reformers cannot fatally interrupt him."<sup>4</sup>

Four years later his attitude toward government was not so indifferent; the Fugitive Slave Law had enraged him as it did Emerson. He expressed his indignation at considerable length in another essay, "Slavery in Massachusetts":

---

<sup>1</sup>Henry D. Thoreau, Thoreau's Complete Works, Vol. 4., pp. 375-380.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 380.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 356.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 383.

If any of them (Congressmen) will tell me that to make a man into a sausage would be much worse--would be any worse--than to make him into a slave,--than it was to enact the Fugitive Slave Law,--I will accuse him of foolishness, of intellectual incapacity, of making a distinction without a difference. The one is just as sensible a proposition as the other.<sup>1</sup>

By now government, especially that of Massachusetts, and slavery had become vital issues to Thoreau, for a government conducted without principle and with injustice just could not continue unchallenged:

Show me a free state, and a court of justice, and I will fight for them, if need be; but show me Massachusetts, and I refuse her my allegiance, and express contempt for her courts....Who can be serene in a country where both the rulers and the ruled are without principle? The remembrance of my country spoils my walk. My thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her.<sup>2</sup>

Because of his "plotting thoughts" against the State, Thoreau was attracted to John Brown who represented violent resistance against that which was unjust---slavery. "It was the personality that impressed him, a rock of an old man, evidently sincere, not believing in expediency."<sup>3</sup> Thoreau met and talked to Brown twice in 1857, first at his own home and the next evening at Emerson's. Two years later he heard Brown speak again in the Concord Town Hall.

Soon after this, John Brown's resistance to that which was unjust became a violent clash of Sharp's rifles with the Federal government in the Harper's Ferry attack. Here was an incident

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 394.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 404-407.

<sup>3</sup>Canby, op. cit., p. 389.

"calculated to arouse Thoreau's imagination. Here was that minority of one which he had always contended might overturn a government."<sup>1</sup> This was an example of his philosophy of individual resistance! To draw attention to his aroused imagination by means of figures, one biographer has counted Thoreau's words written in his Journal after October 18th:

On the nineteenth of October, he wrote some two thousand words in his Journal, only stopping his reflections on Brown's deed to record the falling of the autumn berries. On the twenty-first, some two thousand more; on the twenty-second impassioned paragraphs stretching for another six thousand.<sup>2</sup>

In one of these entires, later used in a speech, Thoreau said of those thrilling days:

If any one who has seen him here can pursue successfully any other train of thought, I do not know what he is made of. If there is any such who gets his usual allowance of sleep, I will warrant him to fatten easily under any circumstances which do not touch his body or purse. I put a piece of paper and a pencil under my pillow, and when I could not sleep I wrote in the dark.<sup>3</sup>

To make sure the citizens of Concord did not remain complacent while his hero sat in prison before his trial, Thoreau summoned them to his own meeting on October 30, 1859. Emerson gave an authentic account of this meeting in his biographical sketch, "Thoreau":

Before the first friendly word had been spoken for Captain John Brown, he sent notices to most houses in Concord that he would speak in a public hall on the condition and character of John Brown, on Sunday evening, and invited

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 390.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 390.

<sup>3</sup>Thoreau, *op. cit.*, p. 417.



all people to come. The Republican Committee, the Abolitionist Committee, sent him word that it was premature and not advisable. He replied,--"I did not send to you for advice, but to announce that I am to speak." The hall was filled at an early hour by people of all parties, and his earnest eulogy of the hero was heard by all respectfully, by many with a sympathy that surprised them.<sup>1</sup>

This eulogy was Thoreau's well-known "Plea for Captain John Brown." In it, he attempted to describe and defend Brown. Thoreau declared that "it was through his agency, far more than any other's, that Kansas was made free."<sup>2</sup> In his defense, he did not apologize for Brown's violence:

I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life, but for his character,--his immortal life; and so it becomes your cause wholly, and is not his in the least. Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light.

I see now that it was necessary that the bravest and humanest man in all the country should be hung. Perhaps he saw it himself. I almost fear that I may yet hear of his deliverance, doubting if a prolonged life, if any life, can do as much good as his death.<sup>3</sup>

His man exemplified the individual, the dignified American, the nucleus of Thoreau's philosophy:

For once we are lifted out of the trivialness and dust of politics into the region of truth and manhood. No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of us all. He needed no babbling lawyer, making false issues, to defend him. He was more than a match for all the judges that American voters, or office-holders of whatever grade, can create. He could not

---

<sup>1</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emerson's Complete Works, Vol. IV., pp. 460-461.

<sup>2</sup>Thoreau, op. cit., p. 410.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 438-439.

have been tried by a jury of his peers, because his peers did not exist.<sup>1</sup>

The fervor for Brown did not decrease; instead it intensified as the days went by. Bronson Alcott noted in his diary on November 19, 1859, that

. . .Thoreau talks freely and enthusiastically about Brown, denouncing the Union, the President, the States, and Virginia particularly; wishes to publish his late speech, and has seen Boston publishers, but failed to find any to print it for him.<sup>2</sup>

Thoreau himself realized his complete attention had been given to Brown's fate. On November 15, he wrote, "I have been so absorbed of late in Captain Brown's fate as to be surprised whenever I detected the old routine running still,--met persons going about their affairs indifferent."<sup>3</sup> By December, Thoreau had envisioned Brown as the sterling example of the great preacher and even thought of the possibility of a group of "Brownites" or apostles of Brown being formed:

The preachers, the Bible men, they who talk about principle and doing to others as you would that they should do unto you,--how could they fail to recognize him, by far the greatest preacher of them all, with the Bible on his lips, and in his acts, the embodiment of principle, who actually carried out the golden rule? All whose moral sense is arcused, who have a calling from on high to preach, have sided with him. It may prove the occasion, if it has not proved it already, of a new sect of Brownites being formed in our midst.<sup>4</sup>

On the day of Brown's execution, December 2, 1859, residents of Concord held a quiet, dignified meeting expressing their re-

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 424-425.

<sup>2</sup>Shepard, op. cit., p. 321.

<sup>3</sup>Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, editors, The Journals of Henry D. Thoreau, Vol. XII., p. 447.

<sup>4</sup>Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, editors, The Journals of Henry D. Thoreau, Vol. XIII., p. 6.

spect for Brown. Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott planned the meeting at which verse, prose, and eulogies were read. Alcott wrote on December 1:

It is arranged that I am to read the Martyr Service, Thoreau selections from the poets, and Emerson from Brown's words. Sanborn has written a dirge, which will be sung, and Rev. Mr. Sears from Wayland will offer prayer.<sup>1</sup>

Thoreau did not cease to speak his mind concerning his hero after Brown was hanged. Indeed for him, Brown was still alive, in spirit at least. In "Last Days of John Brown," he expressed his sincere belief in Brown's continued presence:

Of all the men who were said to be my contemporaries, it seemed to me that John Brown was the only one who had not died....I meet him at every turn. He is more alive than ever he was. He has earned immortality. He is not confined to North Elba nor to Kansas. He is no longer working in secret. He works in public, and in the clearest light that shines on this land.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that so many people misunderstood and slandered this man grieved and angered Thoreau. He felt that they were "lesser" men because of their miscomprehension of Brown as The Hero.

When a noble deed is done, who is likely to appreciate it? They who are noble themselves. I was not surprised that certain of my neighbors spoke of John Brown as an ordinary felon, for who are they? They have either much flesh, or much office, or much coarseness of some kind.<sup>3</sup>

His trial and conviction were a judgment, "not on John Brown, but on America."<sup>4</sup> The judges were only judging themselves. Thoreau declared, "Massachusetts is one of the confederated overseers to prevent" the slaves from escaping. Therefore

<sup>1</sup>Shepard, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

<sup>2</sup>Thoreau, *op. cit.*, pp. 449-450.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 444-445.

<sup>4</sup>Vernon Louis Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, Vol. II, The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800-1860, p. 412.

. . . it was Massachusetts as well as Virginia, that put down this insurrection at Harper's Ferry. She sent the marines there, and she will have to pay the penalty of her sin.<sup>1</sup>

In speaking of this man's fate, Thoreau recalled the blunders that were to the advantage of Brown. "They did not hang him at once, but reserved him to preach to them." Another blunder, the fact that his men were hanged with him, "prolonged and completed" Brown's "victory." Sensing divine intervention, he then asked, "And who, think you, was the manager? Who placed the slave-woman and her child, whom he stooped to kiss for a symbol, between his prison and the gallows?"<sup>2</sup>

Thus the Legend was magnified by a Concord poet who saw Brown as the representative of his theory of individual resistance who was aided by some Deity.

#### Alcott

Amos Bronson Alcott's reactions to slavery and John Brown were so intermingled with those of two close friends that his name could not be avoided in speaking of Emerson and Thoreau. In recording daily events, Alcott often mentioned the two men and their activities. His reports on Thoreau and what he had in common with the hero of the day revealed also Alcott's attitude toward Brown. On November 4, 1859, he referred to Thoreau's

---

<sup>1</sup>Thoreau, op. cit., pp. 430-431.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 420.

brave speech given in the face of possible physical violence--

"A Plea for Captain John Brown."

Thoreau calls and reports about the reading of his lecture on Brown at Boston and Worcester. Thoreau has good right to speak fully his mind concerning Brown, and has been the first to speak and celebrate the hero's courage and magnanimity. It is these which he discerns and praises. The men have much in common: the sturdy manliness, straightforwardness and independence. It is well they met, and that Thoreau saw what he sets forth as no one else can. Both are...dwellers in Nature--Brown taking more to the human side and driving straight at institutions whilst Thoreau contents himself with railing at them and letting them otherwise alone.<sup>1</sup>

Mild, dreamy Alcott was an educator; however his educational practices were far ahead of New Englanders, including the practice of non-segregation of Negro and white pupils in his Boston school. He was "an open abolitionist, and the climax came when he refused to dismiss a little Negro girl who was one of his pupils."<sup>2</sup> Although he was unharmed, the threats he had received caused him to close the school in 1838. Much of the rest of his life was spent at Concord where he came in touch with the two Concord philosophers and John Brown.

Alcott was profoundly impressed by his only meeting with Brown on May 8, 1859, at the Concord Town Hall. Brown told his Kansas story "with surpassing simplicity and sense, impressing us all deeply by his courage and religious earnestness. Our people "--Emerson, Thoreau, Judge Ebenezer Rockwood Hoar, and

---

<sup>1</sup>Shepard, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

<sup>2</sup>Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, editors, *American Authors, 1600-1900*, p. 17.

Mrs. Alcott--had listened, and "some of them contribute something in aid of his plans without asking particulars, such confidence does he inspire."<sup>1</sup> In this single contact, Alcott was affected greatly by Brown's personality and appearance. His flowing beard, Alcott thought, gave him the

. . . soldierly air, and port of an apostle. Though sixty years of age, he is agile and alert, resolute, and ready for any audacity in any crises. I think him about the manliest man I have ever seen, the type and synonym of the Just."<sup>2</sup>

Echoes of Harper's Ferry resounded in Alcott's journals until the end of 1859. Five days after the assault on the Federal government, he "read with sympathy...the newspaper accounts of Capt. Brown's endeavour at Harper's Ferry, now coming to us and exciting politicians everywhere, and everybody."<sup>3</sup> Remembering Brown's favorable appearance at Concord, he decided that

. . .this deed of his, so surprising, so mixed, so confounding to most persons, will give an impulse to freedom and humanity, whatever becomes of its victim and of the States that howl over it."<sup>4</sup>

While eagerly reading the news reports, Alcott was saddened by their contents, for he thought Brown was "too noble a man to be sacrificed so; and yet such as he, and only such, are worthy of the glories of the Cross."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Shepard, op. cit., pp. 315-316.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 320.

Evidently the Concord group entertained the idea of pleading for Brown's mercy and went so far as to contemplate the rescue of their hero. Alcott's entry for November 9 revealed that Thoreau "thinks someone from the North should see Gov. Wise, or write concerning Capt. Brown's character and motives, to influence the Governor in his favor." However, politics perhaps had a stronger hold on Governor Wise, for "slavery must have its way, and Wise must do its bidding on peril of his own safety."<sup>1</sup> On November 19th Alcott dined with Sanborn, who suggested "that I...go to Virginia and get access to Brown...and Gov. Wise...I might ascertain whether Brown would accept a rescue from any company we might raise."<sup>2</sup>

The Concord services held in respect for the hero were "affecting and impressive; distinguished by modesty, simplicity, and earnestness; worthy alike of the occasion and of the man."<sup>3</sup> He quietly mentioned that the church bells on this day were not rung because "it was more fitting to signify our sorrow in the subdued tones, and silent, than by any clamor of steeples and the awakening of angry feelings."<sup>4</sup>

Alcott's testimonies to the saintliness and virtues of Brown were moderate in comparison to those of his associates. Perhaps his coolheaded observations on the activities and attitudes of his Concord friends are of more importance today in

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 321.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 321-322.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 323.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 323.

authenticating in part the impact of Brown's influence on certain New Englanders and the Legend.

Parker

Many other people besides the Concord men took up the cry for John Brown, the hero of Kansas and liberator of slaves. Ministers and professional agitators, plus a host of lesser persons, took up the cry for Brown and against slavery. Among the ministers was Theodore Parker, a Congregational clergyman. He has been known as "New England's foremost anti-slavery preacher."<sup>1</sup> Emerson beheld him as one of the four great men of the age. In an address at the Music Hall in Boston in 1860, the Concord sage opened his remarks on Parker by saying, "It is plain to me that Theodore Parker has achieved a history immortality here, that he has so woven himself in these few years into the history of Boston that he can never be left out of your annals."<sup>2</sup> Emerson saw him as a sincere reformer who "never kept back the truth for fear to make an enemy."<sup>3</sup> Instead of repressing the truth for fear of his own safety and reputation, he "denounced the public crime" in "terrible earnest" and administered to every public official, "his due portion."<sup>4</sup> As a reformer, his most commendable characteristic was in insisting "beyond all men in

---

<sup>1</sup>Whitman Bennett, Whittier, Bard of Freedom, p. 311.

<sup>2</sup>"The Dangers from Slavery," by Theodore Parker, from a sermon on "The Dangers Which Threaten the Rights of Man in America," preached in Music Hall, Boston, July 2, 1854, in Old South Leaflets, Vol. IV., No. 80, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 18.



pulpits...that the essence of Christianity is its practical morals."<sup>1</sup>

Reform in the Church. Because of Parker's attempt to bring reform back into the Church and his belief in the Higher Law, some attention must be given to these two factors which led Parker to listen to Brown. Reform of any kind had passed out of the Church in Parker's time; the Church had seemingly barricaded itself against earthly evils, including the institution of slavery. The majority of the clergy were complacent and non-resistant to evils existing in their very midst. Some figures compiled by Parker showed that in 1854

. . . 600,000 Slaves are directly and personally owned by men who are called "professing Christians," "members in good fellowship" of the church of this land; 80,000 owned by Presbyterians, 225,000 by Methodists,--600,000 Slaves in this land owned by men who profess themselves Christians, and in churches sit down to take the Lord's Supper, in the name of Christ and God! There are ministers who own their fellow-men,--"bought with a price."<sup>2</sup>

The Church was the "most conservative of institutions, more concerned with ritual and with dogma than with life."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in Boston the air was "electric with reform, but the windows of the churches were closed."<sup>4</sup> Parker and a few other clergy challenged this apathy; he was "stubbornly convinced that the Church might yet be made an instrument for social reform." Because of his determined principles and forward manner, he was "bold enough to assume responsibility for the experiment."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>Henry Steele Commager, Theodore Parker, p. 155.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

Belief in Higher Law. In preaching against the black mark of America's society, slavery, Parker appealed to the Higher Law, the Divine Law which is above the laws of any country. From the pulpit in West Roxbury in 1841, he delivered his first sermon on slavery, invoking this Higher Law:

I know that men urge in argument that the Constitution of the United States is the supreme law of the land, and that sanctions slavery. There is no supreme law but that made by God; if our laws contradict that, the sooner they end or the sooner they are broken, why, the better."<sup>1</sup>

According to one biographer, Parker only cared to respect "the laws of human," and he only acknowledged the authority of one Judge.<sup>2</sup>

Protest of Fugitive Slave Law. His strict adherence to this Higher Law caused him to be incensed at the injustice of the infamous Fugitive Slave Law. In his eyes, the supporters of the Bill were weak-spined; even the respected Federal Judges were accomplices in the destruction of liberty, for "see how ready they are to support the Fugitive Slave Bill, which tramples on the spirit of the Constitution,...which outrages Justice and violates the most sacred principles and precepts of Christianity."<sup>3</sup> Even his fellow clergy were not immune from his powerful attacks; their characteristic and comfortable complacency allowed them to accept the consequences of the Bill without murmuring. For this Parker took them to task:

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>3</sup>"The Dangers from Slavery," by Theodore Parker, in Old South Leaflets, Vol. IV., No. 80, p. 13.

The Northern church is red with the guilt of bondage; most of its eminent preachers are deadly enemies to the freedom of the African. How many clerical defenders has the Fugitive Slave Act found in the North? The court house furnished kidnapers at Philadelphia, New York, and Boston; the Church justified them in the name of God. I know of no Church which has ever showed itself more cowardly than the American....

In 1850 and 1851, the most prominent preachers in the North came out in public and justified the kidnapping of men in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. It is true some noble ministers lifted up their voice against it; but the theological leaders went for man-stealing, and knew no Higher Law.<sup>1</sup>

Parker was hated and often in danger of physical harm in the city of Boston from personalities attacked in his pulpit. However he was also a man of action. He became chairman of the Executive Committee of a Vigilance Committee; actively assisted slaves to escape in defiance of the Fugitive Bill; and was arrested, with Wendell Phillips and others, for complicity in attempting to rescue Anthony Burns, a free Negro kidnapped under guise of the Bill.<sup>2</sup> Again Bronson Alcott's Journals prove to be valuable records, for on April 22, 1851, he entered this information on Parker:

Theodore Parker told me today that he had given a month's time and more to this fugitive business, besides a thousand dollars. Moreover, had harboured a parishioner of his, a colored man and fugitive, at his house, during the recent excitement, to shield him from the law's clutch...

Parker is most intrepid in his hostility to this infamous Bill, and report has it that he keeps pistols ready for service in his study.<sup>3</sup>

The orations and actions of this clergyman against slavery

---

<sup>1</sup>Theodore Parker, Additional Speeches, Addresses, and Occasional Sermons, Vol. II., pp. 61-62.

<sup>2</sup>Commager, op. cit., pp. 215-247.

<sup>3</sup>Shepard, op. cit., p. 247.

made his church in Boston one of the instruments for "social reform." Its leader was a powerful influence on the public conscience of Boston. "He spoke and his voice rolled like thunder over the land; he hammered and Boston complacency cracked under his blows; he fulminated and reputations shriveled in that terrible flame."<sup>1</sup>

One of "Secret Six." In view of Parker's success in making the Church an instrument for social reform of slavery plus his sincere belief in the Higher Law and his contempt for the Fugitive Slave Law, it is easy to understand why he found John Brown's philosophy of adherence to some Divine Law and his plans for freeing the slaves worthwhile. His first contact with Brown was in December, 1856; he soon became one of the "secret six" who supported Brown with substantial monetary funds and considerable influence in his "attacks on slavery."

The powerful influence of this orator was a great asset to Brown, who often appealed to him and through him for financial aid. In a letter from Rochester, New York, on February 2, 1858, Brown wrote:

I have nearly perfected arrangements for carrying out an important measure in which the world has a deep interest, as well as Kansas; and only lack from five to eight hundred dollars to enable me to do so,--the same object for which I asked for secret-service money last fall....Do you not know of some parties whom you could induce to give their abolition theories a thoroughly practical shape?...Do you think any of my Garrisonian friends, either at Boston, Worcester, or any other place, can be induced to supply a little "straw," if I will absolutely make "bricks"?<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Comager, op. cit., p. 199.

<sup>2</sup>John Weiss, Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker, Vol. II., pp. 163-164.

Parker's reply was, "I have friends who will give me money without asking any questions."<sup>1</sup>

Parker was in Europe futilely searching for an improvement of health when the raid backed by the "secret six" occurred. This was fortunate for him, and he readily admitted so in a letter to Emerson on December 9, 1859, sent from Rome:

Had I been at Home, sound and well, I think this occasion would have either sent me out of the country... or else have put me in a tight place. Surely I could not have been quite unconcerned and safe. It might not sound well that the minister of the Twenty-Eighth Congregational Church had "left for parts unknown," and that "between two days," and so could not fulfill his obligations to lecture or preach.<sup>2</sup>

Yet Parker did speak out in favor of Brown after the unfortunate incident and defend him, as the Concord philosophers did, as a martyr and saint.

Brown will die, I think, like a martyr, and also like a saint. His noble demeanor, his unflinching braver, his gentleness, his calm, religious trust in God, and his words of truth and soberness, cannot fail to make a profound impression on the hearts of Northern men; yes, and on Southern men. For "every human heart is human."<sup>3</sup>

What the eloquence of orators could not do, Brown did by action and bloodshed. Strange as it may seem, the blood-stained weapons did not seem to sicken Parker as he announced,

. . . what the masterly eloquence of Seward could not accomplish, even by his manly appeal to the Higher Law, nor the eloquence common sense of the people, seems likely to be brought

---

<sup>1</sup>Commager, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

<sup>2</sup>Sanborn, *op. cit.*, p. 513.

<sup>3</sup>Theodore Parker's Two Letters to Francis Jackson, Esq., Boston, sent from Rome, November 24 and December 24, 1859, in James Redpath, *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, p. 87.

to pass by John Brown--no statesman, no orator, but an upright and downright man, who took his life in his hand, and said, "Slavery shall go down even if it be put down with red swords!" I thanked God for John Brown years ago: he and I are no strangers.<sup>1</sup>

His own financial support of Brown had to be defended, and Parker stated, "I do not think the money wasted, nor the lives thrown away."<sup>2</sup> Some vague idea of how much financial aid was given to Brown by Parker and other friends may be gained from a letter sent to Francis Jackson on November 24, 1859, from Rome:

I find it is said in the Democratic newspapers that "Captain Brown had many friends at the North, who sympathized with him in general, and in special approved of this particular scheme of his; they furnished him with some twelve or twenty thousand dollars, it would seem." I think much more than that is true of us. If he had succeeded in running off one or two thousand slaves to Canada, even at the expense of a little violence and bloodshed, the majority of men in New England would have rejoiced, not only in the End, but also in the Means.<sup>3</sup>

As with the rest of the "secret six," Parker had to deny any part in Brown's plans or courageously admit his part in the action and attempt to explain his position. The latter, of course, Parker did:

Such "insurrections" will continue as long as Slavery lasts, and will increase, both in frequency and in power, just as the people become intelligent and moral.

It would not surprise me if there were other and well-planned attempts in other States to do what Captain Brown heroically, if not successfully, tried in Virginia. Nine out of ten may fail--the tenth will succeed.

Men like Captain Brown will be continually rising up among the white people of the Free States, attempting to do them to freedom.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 90-91.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 77-80.

Yet, even though he had fought for social reform, including reform of slavery, in the Church for so long against the noncommittal stand of most Boston clergymen, Parker was amazed that so many preachers spoke in favor of Brown after the raid:

I confess I am surprised to find love for the man, admiration for his conduct, and sympathy with his object, so wide-spread in the North, especially in New England, and more particularly in dear, good, old Boston! Think of the Old South on the same platform with Emerson and Phillips! Think of sermons like Wheelock's, Newhall's, Freeman Clarke's, and Cheever's Thanksgiving sermon at New York--an Orthodox minister of such bulk putting John Brown before Moses!<sup>1</sup>

As a minister supporting Brown's deeds, Parker inevitably prophesied Divine intervention, as did Thoreau, in the fate of his hero:

Let the American State hang his body, and the American Church damn his soul; still, the blessing of such as are ready to perish will fall on him, and the universal justice of the Infinitely Perfect God will take him welcome home. The road to heaven is as short from the gallows as from a throne; perhaps, also, as easy.<sup>2</sup>

It would seem that Parker, a "disciple of the Prince of Peace," was "counseling violence and bloodshed"<sup>3</sup> as he, too, approved of the man and propagated the Legend.

#### Phillips

Wendell Phillips, neither a literary man nor a minister but a professional agitator and orator, was another unqualified admirer

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>3</sup>Commager, op. cit., p. 200.

of Brown. He typified the "mighty force of the spoken word of the pre-Civil War orators and reformers."<sup>1</sup> The advantages of wealth and prestige of a Boston family were sacrificed after Phillips became a radical Abolitionist. He had seen William Lloyd Garrison dragged through Boston by a mob in 1835 and had not relished the scene. However he "did not declare his allegiance to the abolitionist cause" until 1837.<sup>2</sup> This was the year of the Lovejoy murder.

Rev. Elijah Paris Lovejoy, editor of the Alton Observe in Alton, Illinois, had spoken out by means of his editorials against the horrible burning to death of a slave in St. Louis. The majority of the newspapers and the people approved of the deed, and Lovejoy's was a courageous, lone stand against such an outrage. As a result, his press was burned and his life taken by a mob on November 7th in the supposedly free territory of Illinois.<sup>3</sup> As a martyr to anti-slavery publicity, Lovejoy's death caused a sensation among the Abolitionists. "Even those, whose caution, social connections, and business interests had hitherto made them hostile or indifferent to the Antislavery movement, were startled."<sup>4</sup>

Memorial services were held at Faneuil Hall, Boston, on December 8, 1837, in respect for Lovejoy. It was here that

---

<sup>1</sup>Robert E. Spiller and others, editors, Literary History of the United States, p. 558.

<sup>2</sup>Hunitz, op. cit., p. 615.

<sup>3</sup>Parker Pillsbury, Acts of the Anti-Slavery Apostles, pp. 83-84.

<sup>4</sup>William Ellery Channing, Memoir of William Ellery Channing, p. 199.



Wendell Phillips gave his famous extemporaneous defense and eulogy of Lovejoy which has been classed with Patrick Henry's "The Call to Arms" and Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" as one of the great American utterances.<sup>1</sup> Dr. William Ellery Channing remembered Phillips as a young lawyer, who was unknown and had no influence to back him but his family's prestige. He took the stage and began by "expressing his 'surprise at the sentiments of the last speaker.'" Attempts were made to silence the bold, reckless youth, but he continued until he reached the climax:

"I thought those pictured lips," pointing to the portraits in the hall, "would have broken into voice to rebuke the recreant American, the slanderer of the dead. The gentleman said, that he should sink into insignificance, if he dared to gainsay the principles of those resolutions. Sir, for the sentiments he has uttered, on soil consecrated by the prayers of Puritans and the blood of patriots, the earth should have yawned and swallowed him up."<sup>2</sup>

This fearless address given before an audience half hostile to freedom of slaves made Phillips the "chief orator of the anti-slavery cause."<sup>3</sup> In fact Phillips was one of the first of the elite Bostonians to come out "flatfootedly" for abolition.

"What this young man did, just couldn't be bad form for other young men and their sisters to do," and the whole social status of the movement was raised.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Spiller, op. cit., p. 588.

<sup>2</sup>Channing, op. cit., p. 215.

<sup>3</sup>Bennett, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

From then on, Phillips championed the anti-slavery movement. He was one of the organizers of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, and in 1840 he went as a delegate to the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London.<sup>1</sup> Constantly agitating the Bostonians' lethargy toward slavery and its evils, he defined the republic as "nothing but a constant overflow of lava," and he felt his business was to preserve it by keeping public opinion "hot."<sup>2</sup>

Thoreau spoke of Phillips as "one honest man" who "stands so distinctly, so firmly, and so effectively alone."<sup>3</sup> He was a lyceum speaker at Concord on March 12, 1845, and Thoreau was favorably impressed with his presence and eloquence:

We would fain express our appreciation of the freedom and steady wisdom, so rare in the reformer, with which he declared that he was not born to abolish slavery, but to do right....

We consider Mr. Phillips one of the most conspicuous and efficient champions of a true Church and State now in the field, and would say to him,..."God speed you."<sup>4</sup>

Phillips' part in attempting to free Anthony Burns in 1854 has been mentioned previously.<sup>5</sup> In his sermon, "The New Crime Against Humanity." Parker remarked on the eloquence and power of his friend's inspired speech agitating rescue of Burns from the Boston Court House:

<sup>1</sup>Kunitz, op. cit., p. 616.

<sup>2</sup>Leon Howard, Victorian Knight-Errant, a Study of the Early Literary Career of James Russell Lowell, p. 190.

<sup>3</sup>Thoreau, op. cit., p. 312.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 313-314.

<sup>5</sup>Supra, p. 39.

You remember the meeting at Faneuil Hall, last Friday, when even the words of my friend, Wendell Phillips, the most eloquent words that get spoken in America, in this century, hardly restrained the multitude from going, and by violence storming the Court House. What stirred them up? It was the spirit of our fathers--the spirit of justice and liberty in your heart, and in my heart, and in the heart of us all....So excited was that assembly of four or five thousand men, that even the words of eloquent Wendell Phillips could hardly restrain them from going at once rashly to the Court House, and tearing it to the ground.<sup>1</sup>

Harper's Ferry aroused Phillips' imagination as it did Thoreau's and Parker's; now the oratory of the hour was resistance to the tyrants of government and obedience to a Higher Law. Phillips saw Virginia as a "pyramid standing upon its apex" which was entered at one corner by a Connecticut native (Brown) who

. . .fixed his cold gray eye upon the government of Virginia, and it almost vanished in his very gaze. For it seems that Virginia, for a week, asked leave "to be" of John Brown at Harper's Ferry. Connecticut has sent out many a schoolmaster to the other thirty States; but never before so grand a teacher as that Litchfield born schoolmaster at Harper's Ferry, writing as it were upon the Natural Bridge in the face of nations his simple copy: "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God."<sup>2</sup>

What if the Harper's Ferry raid was a failure? Because it was attempted under the guise of freeing the slaves, it was more than a defeat, for "whether in chains or in laurels, Liberty knows nothing but victories." Phillips confessed he now was proud he was an American, after twenty-two men had been found "ready to die for an idea."<sup>3</sup> And what if Brown violated the law? "George

---

<sup>1</sup>Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>Lecture by Wendell Phillips, "The Lesson of the Hour," delivered at Brooklyn, New York, November 1, 1859, in James Redpath, *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 54.

Washington, had he been sought before 1783, would have died on the gibbet, for breaking the laws of his sovereign."<sup>1</sup> Brown's raid was a "sermon" for the citizens of Virginia and the United States; Brown was a representative of all that is right and just. For this, Washington himself would commend Brown:

God makes him the text, and all he asks of our comparatively cowardly lips is to preach the sermon, and say to the American people that, whether that old man succeeded in a wordly sense or not, he stood a representative of law, of government, of right, of justice, of religion, and they were a mob of murderers that gathered about him, and sought to wreak vengeance by taking his life. The banks of the Potomac, doubly dear now to History and to Man! The dust of Washington rests there; and History will see forever on that riverside the brave old man on his pallet, whose dust, when God calls him hence, the Father of his country would be proud to make room for beside his own.<sup>2</sup>

Phillips ventured to place responsibility upon the South for the Virginia violence; "the South planted the seeds of violence in Kansas, and taught Northern men familiarity with the bowie-knife and revolver." He warned them that out of "nine hundred and ninety-nine seeds" planted, this was "the first one that has flowered; this is the first drop of the coming shower." Indirectly he praised the Northern movements against slavery for the sprouting of the seeds of violence. "People do me the honor to say, in some of the western papers, that this is traceable to some teachings of mine."<sup>3</sup>

Brown was buried at North Elba on December 8, 1859; a

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 55-56.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

dignified and lofty eulogy spoken by Phillips was part of the services. The orator of the anti-slavery cause felt "honored to stand under such a roof." He pondered the weighty question, "Could we have asked a nobler representative of the Christian North putting her foot on the accursed system of slavery?"<sup>1</sup> He thought not; Harper's Ferry was not a lone hour--"taken out from a common life," but a goal fulfilled.

It was the flowering out of fifty years of single-hearted devotion. He must have lived wholly for one great idea, when these who owe their being to him, and these whom love has joined to the circle, group so harmoniously around him, each accepting serenely his and her part.

Such statements as "he had abolished slavery in Virginia" became part of the Legend. Hastening to justify such broad assertions, he acknowledged that "you may say this is too much." But a prophet is without honor in his own country:

Our neighbors are the last men we know. The hours that pass us are the ones we appreciate the least.... History will date Virginia Emancipation from Harper's Ferry. True, the slave is still there. So, when the tempest uproots a pine on your hills, it looks green for months,--a year or two. Still, it is timber, not a tree. John Brown has loosened the roots of the slave system; it only breathes,--it does not live,--hereafter.

The Legend slowly crystallized in 1859 under the influence of men like Emerson, Thoreau, Parker and Phillips:

Virginia is weak, because each man's heart said amen to John Brown. His words,--they are stronger even than his rifles. These crushed a State. These have changed the echoes of his rifles and will yet crush slavery....The echoes of his rifles have died awa in the hills, a million hearts guard his words.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Wendell Phillips, Speeches, Lectures, and Letters, Vol. I., p. 292.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 293.

This strangely, was like a prophesy, for a million hearts did guard his words that told of Brown striking the mighty blow that crushed slavery, words that told of John Brown as the "impersonation of God's order and God's law, moulding a better future, and setting for it an example."<sup>1</sup>

#### Beecher

Henry Ward Beecher, who gained a reputation as a pulpit orator in Plymouth Church of Brooklyn, unwittingly added his influence to the support of John Brown. Never more than a luke-warm Abolitionist, Beecher painstakingly strived to maintain a moderate attitude towards slavery.<sup>2</sup> But in 1854, all of Beecher's careful efforts went overboard "with a bang."

While the Kansas struggle was on, Beecher felt the New Englanders migrating to Kansas should have spiritual and material protection. "The Northern settlers have gone there with rifles in their hand, which they are determined to use if necessary." He hoped that the group going from New Haven would "want for nothing" while his parishioners "have it in your hands to give it."<sup>3</sup> The immediate result was numerous pledges of Sharp's rifles from various clergymen of New England; Beecher pledged

---

<sup>1</sup>"Wendell Phillips' on the Puritan Principle," discourse delivered before the Twenty-eighth Congregational Society, (Rev. Theodore Parker's), Music Hall, Boston, December 18, 1859, in James Redpath, Echoes of Harper's Ferry, p. 118.

<sup>2</sup>Paxton Hibben, Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait, p. 134.

<sup>3</sup>The Independent, New York, March 23, 1854; quoted in Hibben, op. cit., p. 134.

his own church to contribute twenty-five rifles "to promote the just and peaceful settlement of the Kansas issue." Suddenly Beecher was allied with the extreme Abolitionists in the eyes of the public. Sharp's rifles shipped to Kansas by well-meaning New Englanders were labeled "Beecher's Bibles" by superficial people, and the label stuck. To make matters worse, the irreligious labeled Plymouth Church "the Church of the Holy Rifles."<sup>1</sup>

It was rumored five years later that Brown carried one of "Beecher's Bibles" in his Harper's Ferry raid. Beecher thought he had been preaching the gospel of love, but by 1859, it seemed the effect of his preaching was death. Like Shakespeare's Macbeth, Beecher's supposedly blood-stained hands haunted him so much that he reversed a decision of fifteen years before and supported a slave-holding mission.<sup>2</sup>

Beecher's changing opinions and hesitating attitude on slavery are more understandable when the man, Henry Ward Beecher, is known. Sinclair Lewis has viewed the man with disdain; "he came out for the right side of every question--always a little too late." In a foreword to a biography of Beecher, Lewis wasted few words in characterizing "the greatest preacher since St. Paul":

John Brown's rifles were called "Beecher Bibles", and from the pulpit Beecher sold female slaves, to gain their freedom....

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 148-149.

Plymouth Church...paid him \$20,000 a year, and in his pocket he liked to carry uncut gems. He would have been an intimate friend of Lincoln except for the detail that Lincoln despised him. He confided to many visitors that he was always glad to pray with Lincoln and to give him advice whenever the president sneaked over to Brooklyn in the dark, and the only flaw is that nobody except Beecher ever saw him sneak....<sup>1</sup>

The Brooklyn clergyman was a minister, showman, and actor all combined into one who coveted friends, pomp, and a reputation:

Beecher is...from his boyhood, blundering, lonely, almost abnormal in the longing for friendly sympathy, through his frantic and fairly phony days as an ambitious young preacher on the Indiana frontier in 1837, up to his anti-macassar splendor as a metropolitan pastor filled with pomposity and metaphors and the best oyster stew. He slapped the backs of all men, he tickled the ribs of almost all the current ideas, and he kissed a surprising proportion of the women.<sup>2</sup>

Sinclair Lewis was not the first to speak of Beecher with his tongue in his cheek. The ardent reformer, Parker, dismissed him as "of not great intellect or great knowledge."<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, out of fairness to Beecher, Alcott's notes written after he heard the noted preacher in Plymouth Church, 1856, should be given consideration. Beecher's dramatic flair, exaggerated metaphors, and exuberant energy held Alcott and a multitude of listeners spellbound:

Beecher has the good sense to leave out the old traditions, and speaks to the fact and the times in his own lively way, as much player perhaps as minister, and so tells on the multitudes....His flowing spirits, his wit, his earnestness and impetuosity, are eloquent, and work the

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. vii.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. viii.

<sup>3</sup>O. B. Frothingham, Life of Theodore Parker, p. 441.



the miracle. Perhaps of preachers he ranks first in energy and effectiveness, in unction and dramatic force; yet I class him among the lecturers rather--or, more truly, as a cross between priest and player, I should say, with the fervour and quaintness of both.<sup>1</sup>

The subject of slavery had been disregarded for some time when Brown's attack against slavery startled Beecher and the rest of the country. Brown's tragedy appaled him. While the insurrectionist was still in prison awaiting trial, Beecher availed himself "of the state of the public mind to make some observations...after a long silence on this subject."<sup>2</sup> On October 30th, his sermon, "The Nation's Duty to Slavery," was based on a text taken from Jeremiah 6:12-19. The prophet revealed the cause of the invasion of victorious enemies upon Judah as being its sinfulness. Beecher paralleled Judah to the South and slavery and the victorious enemies to John Brown and his followers.<sup>3</sup>

Here again, the stories spread by the insurrectionist himself were given as the gospel truth. "This epic in Virginia history...stood in the courage of one man." An old, "peaceful" man sought a new home in Kansas, saw his home and harvest burned by armed Missourians, suffered the loss of one son shot in cold-blood, and saw another son driven to insanity under foul treatment by pro-slavery men. Here "no marines or soldiers aided

---

<sup>1</sup>Shepard, op. cit., p. 288.

<sup>2</sup>Henry Ward Beecher, Freedom and War, Discourses on Topics Suggested by the Times, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 1-2.

the wronged and weak!" Brown's brain was "crazed" by these pro-slavery actions, and as a result, "one man--and sixteen followers" seized "two thousand brave Virginians," and held them "in duress!"<sup>1</sup> The irony of it, when numbers and strength were considered, was that when the proslavery faction attacked "a handful of weak colonists" the government did nothing. But when seventeen men attacked Virginia, "Maryland arms, and Virginia arms, and the United States Government arms...rushed against seventeen men!"<sup>2</sup>

Brown's stand at Harper's Ferry appealed to the pastor's dramatic sense. To him, the heroic part of it all was this "poor, childbereft old man" who refused to take technical advantages and glorified in his principles and motives--"that wounded old father is the most remarkable figure in this whole drama."<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the previously mentioned admirers of Brown, lukewarm Beecher did not approve of his "mad and feeble schemes.... I deplore his misfortunes....I mourn the hiding or obscuration of his reason."<sup>4</sup> Beecher preached against Brown's methods of insurrection as the way to treat the South:

If we hope to ameliorate the condition of the slave, the first step must not be taken by setting the master against him....We have no right to carry into the midst of slavery exterior discontent; and for this reason: that it is not good for the slaves themselves.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 5-6.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 10-13.

Instead he visualized the moulding of a true Christian conscience within the slaves' masters and the slaves themselves as the goal of anti-slavery reformers. "We must work upon the master. Make him discontented with slavery, and he will speedily take care of the rest."<sup>1</sup> And "we are to leave no pains untaken, through the Christian conscience of the South, to give to the slave himself a higher moral status."<sup>2</sup> As difficult as this may have sounded to the radical Abolitionists, it seemed relatively easy to Beecher. He suggested that a "few virtues" be established, "a few usages maintained, a few rights guaranteed to the slaves, and the system is vitally wounded." These rights should be "the right of chastity in the woman, the unblemished household love, the right of parents in their children" for on these three Christian elements of love "stands the whole weight of society."<sup>3</sup>

Even though Beecher did not approve of the hero's methods, he realized the vast possibilities of immortalizing Brown, the failure, as Brown, the martyr. Because of these virtuous dramatic possibilities,

. . .let no man prsy that Brown be spared. Let Virginia make him a martyr. Now, he has only blundered. His soul was noble; his work miserable. But a cord and a gibbet would redeem all that, and round up Brown's failure with a heroic success.<sup>4</sup>

Again another powerful contemporary, this time unwillingly, became a builder of the Legend which "marches on."

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

## THE LEGEND AND JOHN BROWN IN LITERATURE

The John Brown theme has been a favorite in American Literature, but few authors have been inspired to write their best works on it. Since the scope of this paper does not include the study of Brown in literature, this phase will be mentioned only briefly. Nevertheless, the Harper's Ferry episode produced an amazing quantity of verse which must be acknowledged because of its influence in launching the Legend.

A comprehensive study of John Brown as a literary theme has been made by Talbert.<sup>1</sup> This author has emphasized the fact that the legend of Brown has been the material out of which the literature has come; "few writers have known either John Brown or his actions at first hand." In fact, "every essay, verse, play, and novel which deals with John Brown is liable to be accused of sinning against 'historical accuracy.'" Of course, the volume of historically inaccurate literature "has in turn affected the course of the development of the legend."<sup>2</sup> Exaggeration, which was a "literary convention" in the periods before and after the Civil War, also was an important factor in the creation of the John Brown literary theme and the development of the Legend.<sup>3</sup>

Some indication of the bulk of literature inspired by this

---

<sup>1</sup>Joy K. Talbert, John Brown in American Literature. Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Kansas, Vols. I. and II., 1941.

<sup>2</sup>Talbert, op. cit., Vol. I., pp. 143-144.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 81.

theme may be gained by Talbert's analysis. It produced "six good novels and twenty nearly as good, with sixteen of the remaining thirty-one having some points to recommend them." It has inspired "a masterpiece in long narrative poetry and five good short poems, as well as a number of minor poems of some merit." Also, it has produced.

. . . two dramas in verse which are readable, and some plays which have dramatic possibilities. Finally, besides a number of good essays, it stimulated Emerson to warmth in speech and essay and was the source of eloquence in a fine example of Thoreau's style.<sup>1</sup>

Emerson and Thoreau's speeches and essays on John Brown have been reviewed in previous pages. Kirke Mechem's dramatic handling of the theme in his three-act play, John Brown, combined realism and poetry. "Certainly the most satisfactory" treatment for the historian, it received the Maxwell Anderson award in 1938. A noted historian regarded the final scene as the portrayal of the "true significance of John Brown in history as the Legend which grew up about his reputation after the execution."<sup>2</sup>

The half-dozen poems rated high in literary merit by Talbert are Stedman's "How Old Brown Took Harper's Ferry," Whittier's "Brown of Ossawatomie," Melville's "The Portent," Eugene Ware's "John Brown," Vachel Lindsay's "John Brown" and Stephen Vincent Benet's long poem, John Brown's Body. She also lists those

---

<sup>1</sup>Joy K. Talbert, John Brown in American Literature. Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Kansas, Vol. II., p. 679.  
<sup>2</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 473.

by Koopman, Carruth, Guiney, Sandburg, and Robinson as among the better poems. Some one hundred and fifty poems of "varying degrees of worth" remain.<sup>1</sup>

The Brown Legend grew after the Harper's Ferry raid; poets were inspired and verse upon verse was written and published eulogizing the hero, the martyr, the saint. Some idea of the extent to which these poets were moved by the incident may be determined by fragments of verse given here. Of all the early verse written, the following merits attention:

"Brown of Ossawatomie"  
by Whittier

John Brown of Ossawatomie spake on his dying day:  
'I will not have to shrive my soul a priest in Slavery's pay.  
But let some poor slave-mother whom I have striven to free,  
With her children, from the gallows-stair put up a prayer  
for me!'

John Brown of Ossawatomie, they led him out to die;  
And lo! a poor slave-mother with her little child pressed  
nigh.  
Then the bold, blue eye grew tender, and the old harsh face  
grew mild,  
As he stooped between the jeering ranks and kissed the  
negro's child!

The shadows of his stormy life that moment fell apart;  
And they who blamed the bloody hand forgave the loving  
heart.  
That kiss from all its guilty meens redeemed the good intent,  
And round the grisly fighter's hair the martyr's aureole  
bent!

---

<sup>1</sup>Joy K. Talbert, John Brown in American Literature. Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Kansas, Vol. I., pp. 257-258.



"How Old Brown Took Harper's Ferry"  
by Edmund Clarence Stedman

John Brown in Kansas settled, like a steadfast Yankee farmer,  
Brave and godly, with four sons--all stalwart men of might.  
There he spoke aloud for Freedom, and the Border strife  
  grew warmer  
Till the Rangers fired his dwelling, in his absence, in  
  the night;

And Old Brown,  
Osawatomie Brown,  
Came homeward in the morning to find his house burned down.

Then he grasped his trusty rifle, and boldly fought for  
  Freedom;  
Smote from border unto border the fierce invading band:  
And he and his brave boys vowed--so might Heaven help and  
  speed 'em--  
They would save those grand old prairies from the curse that  
  blights the land:

And Old Brown,  
Osawatomie Brown,  
Said, "Boys, the Lord will aid us!" and he shoved his ram  
  rod down.

. . . . .

How the conquerors wore their laurels; how they hastened on  
  the trial;  
How Old Brown was placed, half dying, on the Charlestown  
  court-house floor;  
How he spoke his grand oration, in the scorn of all denial;  
What the brave old madman told them, these are known the  
  country o'er.

"Hang Old Brown,  
Osawatomie Brown,"  
Said the judge, "and all such rebels!" with his most judicial  
  frown.

But, Virginians, don't do it! for I tell you that the flagon,  
Filled with blood of Old Brown's offspring, was first poured  
  by Southern hands;  
And each drop from Old Brown's life-veins, like the red gore  
  of the dragon,  
May spring up a vengeful Fury, hissing through your slave-  
  worn lands!

And Old Brown,  
Osawatomie Brown,  
May trouble you more than ever, when you've nailed his  
  coffin down!<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Edmund Clarence Stedman, The Poetical Works of Edmund Clarence Stedman, pp. 64-70.



"Hero of Harper's Ferry"  
by William Herbert Carruth

Had he been made of such poor clay as we,  
Who, when we feel a little fire aglow  
'Gainst wrong within us, dare not let it grow,  
But crouch and hid it, lest the scorner see  
And sneer, yet bask our self-complacency  
In that faint warmth,--had he been fashioned so,  
The Nation ne'er had come to that birth-throe  
That gave the world a new Humanity.

He was no mere professor of the Word--  
His life a mockery of his creed; he made  
No discount on the Golden Rule, but heard  
Above the senate's brawls and din of trade  
Even the clank of chains, until he stirred<sup>1</sup>  
The Nation's heart by that immortal raid.

Probably the most widely quoted of later verse is the poem of Eugene Ware, a Kansas poet. The last stanza of "John Brown" is:

From boulevards  
O'erlooking both Nyanzas,  
The statued bronze shall glitter in the sun,  
With rugged lettering:

JOHN BROWN, OF KANSAS:  
HE DARED BEGIN:  
HE LOST,  
BUT, LOSING, WON."<sup>2</sup>

A few of the other poets of the early twentieth century who wrote on Brown deserve attention here also:

---

<sup>1</sup>William Herbert Carruth, "Hero of Harper's Ferry," Review of Reviews, November 1892, 6:492.

<sup>2</sup>Eugene Fitch Ware, Rhymes of Ironquill, pp. 77-79.

"John Brown"  
by Vachel Lindsay

(Note by Lindsay - To be sung by a leader and chorus,  
the leader singing the body of the poem, while the  
chorus interrupts with the question.)

I've been to Palestine.  
What did you see in Palestine?  
I saw the ark of Noah--  
It was made of pitch and pine.  
I saw old Father Noah  
Asleep beneath his vine.  
I saw Shem, Ham and Japhet  
Standing in a line.  
I saw the tower of Babel  
In the gorgeous sunrise shine--  
By a weeping willow tree  
Beside the Dead Sea.

. . . . .

I've been to Palestine.  
What did you see in Palestine?  
Old John Brown.  
Old John Brown.  
I saw his gracious wife  
Dressed in a homespun gown.  
I saw his seven sons  
Before his feet bow down.  
And he marched with his seven sons,  
His wagons and goods and guns,  
To his campfire by the sea,  
By the waves of Galilee.

I've been to Palestine.  
What did you see in Palestine?  
I saw the harp and psalt'ry  
Played for Old John Brown.  
I heard the ram's horn blow,  
Blow for Old John Brown.  
I saw the Bulls of Bashan--  
They cheered for Old John Brown.

. . . . .

I've been to Palestine.

What did you see in Palestine?

Old John Brown.  
 Old John Brown.  
 And there he sits  
 To judge the world.  
 His hunting-dogs  
 At his feet are curled.  
 His eyes half-closed,  
 But John Brown sees  
 The ends of the earth,  
 The Day of Doom.  
 And his shot-gun lies  
 Across his knees--  
 Old John Brown,  
 Old John Brown.<sup>1</sup>

"Ossawatonic"  
 by Sandburg

I don't know how he came,  
 shambling, dark, and strong.

He stood in the city and told men:  
 My people are fools, my people are young,  
     my people must learn, my people are terrible workers  
                                     and fighters.

Always he kept on asking: Where did that blood come from?

They said: You for the fool killer,  
 you for the booby hatch  
 and a necktie party.

They hauled him into jail.  
 They sneered at him and spit on him,  
 And he wrecked their jails,  
 Singing, 'God damn your jails,'  
 And when he was most in jail  
 Grumpy among the crazy in the dark  
 Then he was most of all out of jail  
 Shambling, dark, and strong,  
 Always asking: Where did that blood come from?

---

<sup>1</sup>Vachel Lindsay, Collected Poems by Vachel Lindsay, pp. 164-

They laid hands on him  
 And the fool killers had a laugh  
 And the necktie party was a go, by God.  
 They laid hands on him and he was a goner.  
 They hammered him to pieces and he stood up.  
 They buried him and he walked out of the grave, by God,  
 Asking again: Where did that blood come from?<sup>1</sup>

Stephen Vincent Benet's well-known narrative poem, John Brown's Body, about the Civil War was written with Brown as the unifying element. John Brown's spirit, by means of the familiar battle refrain, marched through the poem as a symbol:

John Brown's raid has gone forward, the definite thing is done,

...

A dubious doctrine dubiously received.<sup>2</sup>

It was over with John Brown when the sun rose up  
 To show him the town in arms, and he did not flee,

...

And he did not die until November was cool

...

So now, the Confederacy,  
 Sick with its mortal sickness, yet lives on.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the poem, Brown's spirit was "whitewashed" and glorified:

Out of John Brown's strong sinews the tall skyscrapers grow  
 Out of his heart the chanting buildings rise.<sup>4</sup>

Benet dedicated a whole book to Brown's memory, "making his name the pivot on which his nation swung its mighty war."<sup>5</sup> Through the literature written by Benet and numerous other authors, the Legend continues to grow and finally becomes the accepted truth.

---

<sup>1</sup>Rebecca West, ed., Selected Poems of Carl Sandburg, pp. 196-197.

<sup>2</sup>Benet, op. cit., p. 206.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 335.

<sup>5</sup>Harriet Monroe, "A Cinema Epic," Poetry, November 1928, 33:94.

## THE SOUTHERN LEGEND (AN ATTACK ON BROWN)

Why question the Legend which enveloped the man, John Brown? Didn't Old Brown defend and aid Kansas to become a Free State? Wasn't he willing to lead raids against pro-slavery men? Didn't he risk his life in his attempt to free the slaves in Virginia and thus become the spark that ignited the Civil War? And wasn't he the apotheosis of Abolitionist feelings in New England before and during the Civil War period? The answer to any one of these questions cannot be completely positive or negative when the man's history is examined from an objective point of view; however, the Legend cannot be accepted as the historical truth and remain unchallenged.

Yet, strange it is that the Redpath version remained unchallenged for years. Instead the supposed facts were repeated over and over again by later biographers and well-meaning critics. Of course, Southern pro-slavery newspapers of the day attacked John Brown immediately after the Pottawatomie Massacre and with reason. Also, the leading Kansas Free-State editor and one of the conservatives in the Free State party took it upon himself to "ventilate" Kansas history. In his paper, The Herald of Freedom of Lawrence, G. W. Brown exposed Old Brown's actions in Kansas with remarkable accuracy starting with his issue of October 29, 1859. The accusations were so pronounced by a Free-Stater that replies took the form of personal attacks upon the editor and his reputation suffered greatly. "Redpath ridiculed G. W. Brown as a coward, and all the opposition called him liar

and slanderer." Publication of the paper was discontinued with the issue of December 17, 1859, and Brown returned to the East for supplies, or so he said, and his enemies exulted.<sup>1</sup>

G. W. Brown was not one to give up easily and remain quiet on what he felt was a vital issue. Installments of his Reminiscences of Old Brown began to appear in the Kansas newspapers in 1879. After a few publications, the editors refused to "digest" any more. The editorial of November 13, 1879, of the Tribune, explained:

The graves of Free State and pro-slavery men, dead for more than twenty years, are invaded, and their bones and reputation dragged into the arena, with an animus suggesting the scramble of jackals and hyenas over the bones of a dead lion....

We never saw John Brown but once, but our knowledge of the old man is supplemented with a knowledge of his work, and complemented by the world-wide influence for good of the old martyr's reputation. His fame is the property of the world, and John Brown one of its idols. His canonization has been informal, but complete, and we cheerfully accept the popular verdict.<sup>2</sup>

G. W. Brown was able to find a publisher for the complete volume which came out in 1880. And after the appearance of biographies by Sanborn, Hinton and Connelley, Brown again demanded to be heard in False Claims of Kansas Historians Truthfully Corrected, 1902.

---

<sup>1</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 268.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 378.

### The Southern Legend

C. W. Brown was only one unpopular dissenter among all the eulogists for a long period of time, and his accusations were hardly acknowledged even in Kansas, his home state. But Easterners were beginning to question the Brown eulogy, too. The Reverend David N. Utter doubted the validity of the praises heaped upon John Brown and said so publicly in 1883:

For two or three years a spirit of doubt has been slowly spreading eastward from Kansas whether the man deserves any eulogy whatever. John Brown was a disturbing influence in Kansas from the first. He went to the territory not as a settler, but to fight. His voice was always for war, and he probably was more anxious to fight Missouri than to make Kansas free.<sup>1</sup>

Utter refused to recognize Brown as a "proper hero for the youth of our country to worship." Instead he tipped the scales of judgment completely the other way and found Brown guilty on every count:

Viewed in the largest possible way, there is little that is admirable in this man's character; and if our civilization is worth anything, his entire public or fighting career is to be utterly condemned.... We believe that as his true history, too long concealed, becomes known, admiration for him will be changed to disgust, and disgust to anger, that we have been so long deceived.<sup>2</sup>

Historians were discovering the facts so carefully glossed over by the biographers and Brown himself. The discovery was, and still is, a slow, tedious investigation. Spring, a member

---

<sup>1</sup>David N. Utter, "John Brown of Osawatimie," North American Review, November 1883, 137:437.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 445-446.

of the Massachusetts Historical Society, interpreted Brown's part in the history of Kansas as a "parenthesis" in 1885; however, he gave credit to the "immense vibration of Brown's career upon the nation" which "had its source in the Virginia campaign and its ill-fated but heroic sequel."<sup>1</sup>

Other historians followed Spring, agreed with his interpretation, and enlarged upon it. Eli Thayer, organizer of the New England Emigrant Aid Company, did much to encourage emigration of New Englanders to Kansas and other Territories. He looked upon John Brown as one of the "cranks" developed by a "great and long-continued agitation of the public mind" -- the pros and cons of slavery. These cranks "are the foam upon the billows of public excitement." He thought Brown's admirers very juvenile for only "a very young child might think these white-caps were really the storm-king, raising and controlling the billows, guiding and governing the storm." As for Brown's role in Kansas history, he continued the metaphor by declaring, "such frothy interlopers had reached Kansas near the close of the struggle. They did little but harm."<sup>2</sup>

James Ford Rhodes spoke with "great positiveness" about "the historical significance" of the Pottawatomie Massacre and "Brown's subsequent actions." Another historian, he was not ready to concede that Brown's services to Kansas itself were

---

<sup>1</sup>Leverett Wilson Spring, Kansas, The Prelude to the War for the Union, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup>Eli Thayer, A History of the Kansas Crusade, Its Friends and Its Foes, p. 201.



of the highest importance:

It may be safely affirmed that Kansas would have become a free State in much the same manner and about the same time that it actually did, had John Brown never appeared on the scene of action.<sup>1</sup>

He only credited Brown with making the contest more bitter and bloody after he directed the Pottawatomie Massacre.<sup>2</sup>

Critics began to take a stand against the hero also. The dominant note of American literature, in Austin M. Courtenay's eyes, was sincerity, truth, genuine motives, and natural form. He saw this dominant note in life as well as art and letters; for this reason he could not understand why

. . . there should be such a myth-growth as has covered the actual John Brown of Osawatomie with accretions of tradition, invention, perverse and factless assertion, plastered on without effective protest, so that he is regarded as a hero and martyr--the incarnation of a righteous idea-- the prophet of an era of liberty--the John Baptist of a new evangel... the sublime, massive, inspired figure which stands at the opening gateways of our war, as Lincoln presides over their closure.<sup>3</sup>

Fifty years after Harper's Ferry, a New Englander ventured the judgment that Brown's personality, "not his historic importance, which was trifling," explained his remarkable immortality. He acknowledged that "for Brown's apotheosis much must be forgotten and even more must be forgiven."<sup>4</sup> Even so, he held Brown

---

<sup>1</sup>James Ford Rhodes, History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850, Vol. II, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>3</sup>Austin M. Courtenay, "The Actual John Brown," The Chautauquan, January 1897, 24:446-447.

<sup>4</sup>John T. Morse, Jr., "John Brown Fifty Years After," Atlantic Monthly, November 1910, 106:667.

responsible for Pottawatomie, an incident which was either not believed or was disregarded by many Eastern hero-worshippers who wholeheartedly forgot or forgave.

By now the biographies of Sanborn, Hinton, Connelley, and Villard had been published. Villard's volume was being reviewed by a critic who considered an analysis of Brown's character the more difficult because of the extreme characterizations into which biographers had been tempted. Yet he questioned the hero role given Brown by so many. "A ruffianly fanatic who attempted to light the torch of something worse than war is poor material for a hero."<sup>1</sup> This "something worse" was a general rebellion of slaves against their masters and civil authority. Half a century had passed since the Brown incident, and by now

. . . while the more monstrous charges may be dismissed and his sincerity of purpose conceded, the present generation, which is coming to look at the whole struggle between North and South without prejudice, will be reluctant to admit that a man who endeavoured to incite a general insurrection of slaves deserves a martyr's crown.<sup>2</sup>

Hill Peebles Wilson's volume of 1913 was the first biography to appear which characterized Brown as a hypocrite, shyster, horse thief, and villain. He went to the complete opposite of Redpath, Sanborn, and Villard who were "served up with pepper and vinegar and tobasco sauce on almost every page."<sup>3</sup> One literary critic considered the book of more value and its credibility more apparent,

---

<sup>1</sup>Edward Fuller, "Mr. Villard's 'John Brown'," Bookman, February 1911, 32:631.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 630.

<sup>3</sup>"Review of John Brown Soldier of Fortune by Hill Peebles Wilson," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, September 1914, 1:320.

. . . if the author had adopted a style more consonant with the decorum of scholarship and had shown more tolerance for what he regards as mistakes of authors, who have the reputation of honest men. Mud slinging does not further the cause of scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

Instead of achieving his goal of completely discrediting Brown, Wilson glorified him into a great villain and adventurer. He defined Brown as a figure who "will rank among adventurers as Napoleon ranks among marshals; as Captain Kidd among pirates; and as Jonathan Wild among thieves."<sup>2</sup> Wilson's extreme viewpoint is more easily comprehended when his financial obligation to Mrs. Sara T. D. Robinson for publication of the volume is known. Mrs. Robinson was the wife of Charles Robinson, the first state governor of Kansas and one of the influential Free Staters in the Kansas struggle.

By 1924 conflicting opinions of dissenters who objected to Brown's sainthood were not easily suppressed by hero-worshippers, and the dissenters' reputations were not in as much danger as they would have been before 1900. Because of this fact, due to the lapse of time, more extreme attacks were made upon Brown. Leland H. Jenks belittled him as "one of the many characters in our history whose renown bulks vastly larger than his accomplishment. The deeds by which he achieved immortality were actually few, and often far from creditable."<sup>3</sup> Historically Brown was

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>2</sup>Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 407.

<sup>3</sup>Leland H. Jenks, "The John Brown Myth," American Mercury, March 1924, 1:267.

another "unsuccessful business man of middle age turned adventurer," not the legendary "heroic fanatic martyred in the cause of freedom."<sup>1</sup>

R. P. Warren's biography, 1929, was less extreme, although this Kentuckian followed the Wilson or Southern point of view of the Kansas phase of Brown's career. Warren judged Brown uncandid, contradictory, and untruthful when he analyzed his prison period.<sup>2</sup>

#### An Impartial View

The latest and most thorough study of the historic documents surrounding John Brown and their relation to the Brown Legend was made by Malin in 1942. The most impartial view of Brown to date was given by him, perhaps because twentieth century historians are able to view their subjects with more perspective. Careful attention was paid to the contemporary documents of the Kansas conflict, especially the Pottawatomie Massacre. Malin did not minimize the Pottawatomie atrocity, but he also did not consider it unique in brutality. Previous Brown writers had never noticed that the Squatter Sovereign gave one column of space to a "Horrible tragedy in Buchanan Co., Missouri" on June 10, 1856, in which "a man and wife and five children between the

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>2</sup>Warren, op. cit., pp. 385-446.

ages of one and sixteen 'were murdered in cold blood, in the dead of night, by five cowardly villains--miscalled men.'<sup>1</sup> This news account was flanked on either side on the same page by early reports of the Pottawatomie massacre. The Buchanan county crime was the worse of the two; in it Mormon prejudice was implied. However, it was forgotten and Brown's crime became memorable.<sup>2</sup> As for Malin's opinion of Brown, he surmised that "he was no more outstanding as a villain than as a hero."<sup>3</sup>

#### An Attack on Brown

Why has the apotheosis of John Brown been questioned, attacked, and minimized by newspaper men, ministers, historians, literary critics and biographers? The history of Brown's life and activities must be carefully examined and scrutinized in order to answer this question adequately.

John Brown was born in Torrington, Connecticut, May 9, 1800, but he was not, as he led Emerson and others to believe, "the fifth in descent from Peter Brown, who came to Plymouth in the Mayflower, in 1620."<sup>4</sup> Genealogical research has proved that the Peter Brown to whom John Brown's ancestry was traced was born in Windsor, Connecticut, in 1632.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 753.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 753.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 487.

<sup>4</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emerson's Complete Works, Vol. III., p. 267.

<sup>5</sup>Villard, op. cit., pp. 10 & 591, note 6.

Business Affairs. According to the Legend, Brown was "scrupulously honest and a man of comprehensive grasp" in business affairs.<sup>1</sup> Recent historians and critics have taken into account these business affairs to understand better the man. Never a reliable, steadfast business man, Brown changed his occupation and place of residence frequently. He was "farmer, tanner, surveyor, canal contractor, stock raiser, and wool merchant."<sup>2</sup> Confirmation of this statement can be found in other sources, with further explanation that Brown "engaged in more than twenty distinct business ventures in at least six different states. Most of these were unsuccessful, some ended in bankruptcy, and two or more in crime."<sup>3</sup> Malin considered the number of litigations on record against Brown, and judged that "he must have been almost constantly a defendant in court for failure to meet his obligations in payment of notes, or wages, or in fulfillment of other contracts."<sup>4</sup> It would appear that Brown was unscrupulous and dishonest for "several of the cases in question leave no doubt of flagrant dishonesty on his part in both business and family relations."<sup>5</sup> Of course, a man cannot be judged solely by his business dealings. Instead, "this record of unreliability proven in court and in correspondence" is important as somewhat of an indicator when Brown's

---

<sup>1</sup>E. N. Vallandigham, "John Brown--Modern Hebrew Prophet," Putnam's Magazine, December 1909, 7:294.

<sup>2</sup>Jenks, op. cit., p. 269.

<sup>3</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 3; Villard, op. cit., pp. 35-41.

<sup>4</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

reliability as a witness after he became a public figure is considered.<sup>1</sup> Brown's own autobiography of his childhood seems to show that he himself felt one of his faults was a habit of telling lies. Written for the son of a friend in the form of a letter, it was dated July 15, 1857, Red Rock, Iowa. The following fragment is spelled, punctuated, and underlined exactly as written by Brown:

Mr. Henry L. Stearns  
My Dear Young Friend

...I must not neglect to tell you of a very bad and foolish habit to which John was somewhat addicted. I mean telling lies; generally to screen himself from blame; or from punishment. He could not well endure to be reproached; & I now think had he been oftener encouraged to be entirely frank; by making frankness a kind of atonement for some of his faults; he would not have been so often guilty of this fault; nor have been obliged to struggle so long in after life with so mean a habit....

The way he got along with a company of men, & boys; made him quite a favorite with the serious & more intelligent portion of older persons. This was so much the case; & secured for him so many little notices from those he esteemed; that his vanity was very much fed by it; & he came forward to manhood quite full of self-conceit; & self-confident; notwithstanding his extreme bashfulness....

Your Friend  
J. Brown<sup>2</sup>

Oath Against Slavery. The legendary Brown had been planning how he could help the slaves since he was a boy, and a

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>F. B. Sanborn, "The Virginia Campaign of John Brown," Atlantic Monthly, January 1875, Part I, 35:17-20.

secret oath against slavery existed within the Brown family.<sup>1</sup> The Adirondack project sponsored by Gerrit Smith evidently was the result of Brown's desire to aid the Negroes who were his neighbors. Besides this, he later explained to Sanborn that "he hoped to find among them some who would become his soldiers" and who could be trained and equipped at North Elba without attracting suspicion. Also he wished his wife and children to have a "place of refuge...when he should go on his campaign."<sup>2</sup> Yet Malin discredited Brown's sincerity in this project. "There is no evidence...that Brown remained at North Elba to fulfill any plan regarding the negroes during either of the periods that his family resided there."<sup>3</sup> His explanatory footnote documents this statement:

At the time of the Harpers Ferry excitement the New York Evening Post, December 20, 1859, published a series of letters all written by Brown in 1849 to Willis A. Hodges, one of the negroes on the Smith lands. These letters give the most intimate record available about that episode.<sup>4</sup>

It would seem then that actually the views and activities of the family did not differ materially from those of any other active anti-slavery or abolition people of the time.

<sup>1</sup>Supra, pp. 10 & 16.

<sup>2</sup>F. B. Sanborn, "The Virginia Campaign of John Brown," Atlantic Monthly, January 1875, 35:22.

<sup>3</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.5.



### Did Brown Defend and Aid Kansas?

Because of his intense feelings on the human bondage of Negroes, didn't Old John Brown defend and aid Kansas to become a Free State? Historians Spring and Rhodes thought not.<sup>1</sup> However, Sanborn asserted that the future of Kansas was guided by Brown, and Connelley was positive that the Pottawatomie Massacre directed by Brown saved Kansas from slavery.<sup>2</sup>

Brown's Move to Kansas. Brown's sons--Owen, Frederick, Salmon, John, and Jason--were the first of the family to migrate to Kansas; they arrived in April, 1855. John, Junior, soon wrote to his father asking for arms to be sent to Kansas for protection of the anti-slavery settlers against pro-slavery "ruffians." He proposed that the "Anti-slavery portion of the inhabitants should immediately thoroughly arm and organize themselves in military companies."<sup>3</sup> It must be remembered that in 1855 two conflicting factions were endeavoring either by peaceful or by violent means to enter Kansas as a state in the Union--free or slave. History has recorded the "bogus laws" set up in Kansas by pro-slavery Missourians, Eli Thayer's organized effort to send free-state settlers to Kansas, and the resulting violence in various parts of the state. John Brown, Junior, apparently was not going to

<sup>1</sup>Supra, pp. 67-69.

<sup>2</sup>Supra, pp. 8-14.

<sup>3</sup>Letter of John Brown, Jr., Brownsville, K. T., dated May 20, 24, and 26, to John Brown,--Original in Dreer Collection, Pennsylvania Historical Society, in Villard, op. cit., pp. 83-84.

give in to this pro-slavery violence without a fight.

His father left the family at North Elba under the patronage of Gerrit Smith and came to Kansas in October, 1855, with an ample supply of guns. Financially destitute himself, he had personally collected funds, arms, and clothing "for the cause of Kansas" from Abolitionists at Syracuse, New York; Akron, Ohio; and Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>1</sup> Villard explained why it was possible for Brown to be so successful in his personal solicitations. He said of the Akron meetings:

Because of their interest in the Kansas crisis, and in the Browns, their former neighbors, the people were quickly roused by Brown's graphic words, and liberally contributed arms of all sorts, ammunition and clothing. Committees of Aid were appointed and ex-Sheriff Lane was deputed to accompany Brown in a canvass of the village shops and offices for contributions.<sup>2</sup>

Some idea as to the amounts of supplies and funds obtained may be gained by the fact that at Cleveland he was so successful that he thought it best to "detain a day or two longer." He had raised nearly two hundred dollars in that way in the two previous days, principally in arms and ammunition.<sup>3</sup> Brown's success in making personal solicitations was an important factor in his later influence on New Englanders.

As stated by several biographers, Brown may have gone to Kansas to take advantage of conditions there to engage in his

<sup>1</sup>Villard, op. cit., pp. 85-86.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>3</sup>John Brown, Akron, Ohio, August 15, 1855, to his wife and children, --Original in possession of Mrs. Ellen Brown Fablinger, in Villard, op. cit., pp. 85-86.

campaign against slavery. In his interview with Mason, Vallandigham and others after the Harper's Ferry raid, Brown stated that "I did not go there (to Kansas) to settle, but because of the difficulties."<sup>1</sup> True, Brown was interested in the Kansas struggle, yet after he arrived, his first letters to the family included such comments on Kansas as "I believe Missouri is fast becoming discouraged about making Kansas a slave State, and I think the prospect of its becoming free is brightening every day" and "I feel more and more confident that slavery will soon die out here,--and to God be the praise."<sup>2</sup> Because these and other letters sent by Brown to his family in 1855 did not indicate the opinions of a warring man, Brown's original intention may have been to improve his financial prospects.<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Anne Brown Adams later wrote, "Father said his object in going to Kansas was to see if something would not turn up to his advantage."<sup>4</sup> This something may have been a financial advantage in the promising, unsettled lands of the Territory called Kansas.

His son, John Brown, Junior, was active as a military leader among the Free-Staters during the winter of 1856. He led a small army to the defense of Lawrence, which was threatened by pro-slavery Missourians, and his account of this campaign was given to the Cleveland Leader in 1879:

---

<sup>1</sup>"Brown's Interview with Mason, Vallandigham, and Others," New York Herald, October 21, 1859, in F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, p. 563.

<sup>2</sup>F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, pp. 201-204.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 199-221.

<sup>4</sup>F. B. Sanborn, Recollections of Seventy Years, Vol. I., p. 152.

During the winter of 1856 I raised a company of riflemen from the Free-State settlers who had their homes in the vicinity of Osawatomie and Pottawatomie Creek, and marched with this company to the defence of Lawrence, May, 1856, but did not reach the latter place in time to save it from being burned by the Missourians at that time. On this march I was joined by three other companies, and was chosen to the command of the combined forces.<sup>1</sup>

The Pottawatomie Massacre. In regard to the Pottawatomie Massacre, various historians ascribed great importance to Old Man Brown's letters of April 7 and June 29, which were written to his wife. These letters indicated that he had made plans for some undertaking previous to the Lawrence alarm, plans which included leaving his settlement. On April 7, he wrote,

We are doing off a house for Orson Day, which we hope to get through with soon; after which we shall probably soon leave this neighborhood, but will advise you further when we do leave.<sup>2</sup>

These plans also included severance of his connection with the Free-State militia under Captain John Brown, Junior, and formation of an independent company. On June 29, Brown wrote, "we were called to the relief of Lawrence, May 22....John was captain of a company to which Jason belonged; the other six were a little company by ourselves....Next day our little company left."<sup>3</sup>

This independent company--consisting of his sons; Owen, Frederick, Salmon, and Oliver; a son-in-law, Henry Thompson; Theodore Wiener; and James Townsley-- was formed for a definite

---

<sup>1</sup>F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, p. 237, footnote 3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

reason, the Pottawatomie Massacre, which occurred on May 23, 1856. Brown's participation in this massacre has been denied by some hero-worshippers and justified by others, but the confession of Townsley, one of the company, and the memorandum book of Judge Hanway, a prominent local leader, plus much other documented evidence reveals that Old Man Brown directed the midnight slaying of five victims living by the Pottawatomie Creek.<sup>1</sup> Townsley told of the brutality of the massacre:

Some time after dark we were ordered to march....Soon after crossing the Mosquito Creek some one of the party knocked at the door of a cabin, but received no reply.... The next place we came to was the residence of the Doyles. John Brown, three of his sons, and son-in-law went to the door....The old man Doyle and two sons were called out and marched some distance from the house....Old John Brown drew his revolver and shot the old man Doyle in the forehead, and Brown's two youngest sons immediately fell upon the younger Doyles with their short two-edged swords....

The company then proceeded down Mosquito Creek to the house of Allen Wilkinson. Here the old man Brown...went to the door and ordered Wilkinson to come out....Wilkinson was ...marched some distance...and slain in the road, with a short sword, by one of the younger Browns....

We then...came to the house of Henry Sherman, generally known as Dutch Henry. Here John Brown and the party... brought out William Sherman...and marched him down into the Potawatomie Creek, where he was slain with swords by Brown's two youngest sons, and left lying in the creek.

It was the expressed intention of Brown to execute Dutch Henry also, but he was not found at home.<sup>2</sup>

Old Man Brown's reliability as a witness may be questioned in his statements concerning the massacre. In the Mason interview,

---

<sup>1</sup>Malin, op. cit., pp. 315-319; Charles Robinson, The Kansas Conflict, pp. 265-267.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Robinson, op. cit., pp. 266-267.

the wounded old man declared, "I killed no man except in fair fight." (One could hardly say that the Pottawatomie victims had a fair fight.) "I fought at Black Jack Point and at Osawatomie; and if I killed anybody, it was at one of these places."<sup>1</sup> While he was in the Charlestown jail, the prisoner again "reiterated his assertion, often made in those prison days, that he was not personally concerned in the Pottawatomie murders."<sup>2</sup>

His comments in a letter to his wife in June, 1856, were also void of any admission of the crimes.<sup>3</sup> This may be dismissed as only an indication of his regard and love for the family, his desire that they not worry unnecessarily. Yet, if he were proud of his action, surely he would boast of his bold strike against five pro-slavery men who had supposedly threatened the Browns and other Free Staters. Or was that the reason, the justification for the black mark upon Kansas history?

Sanborn and Redpath claimed that the victims were dangerous and vicious men who had menaced the Free-State settlers, and that it was Old Man Brown's duty to quiet the disturbers who were responsible for violence in the territory around Osawatomie where the Browns lived.<sup>4</sup> This reason is not supported by evidence. Old Brown himself in addressing the legislative committee of Massachusetts in 1857 recalled the conditions in Kansas before

---

<sup>1</sup>"Brown's Interview with Mason, Vallandigham, and Others," in F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, p. 569.

<sup>2</sup>Villard, op. cit., p. 545.

<sup>3</sup>F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, pp. 236-241.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 254-257; James Redpath, The Public Life of Capt. John Brown, pp. 115-117.

May, 1856, and refuted his biographers' justification:

You may remember that from the Shannon treaty which ended the Wakarusa war, till early in May, 1856, there was general quiet in Kansas. No violence was offered to our citizens when they went to Missouri. I frequently went there myself....I was known there; yet they treated me well.<sup>1</sup>

Villard confirmed this statement and explained that "the instances of brutality or murder...all took place miles to the north, in the vicinity of Lawrence or Leavenworth. And the companies, including the Browns, "deemed it quite safe to leave the settlements to themselves, despite the character of the Shermans and the Doyles."<sup>2</sup> Andreas recorded the only serious disturbance in southern Kansas, and this was the action of Free-Staters.<sup>3</sup>

Villard demonstrated that most of the charges against the murdered men were weak; he condones the act as "an attack on its own ground" of the "hideous institution human slavery, against which Brown's whole life was a protest."<sup>4</sup> A previous discussion of Brown's professed oath and activities against slavery has refuted this justification.<sup>5</sup> Charles Robinson, later governor of the state, decided "this blow was struck... to involve the sections, North and South, in war."<sup>6</sup> This reasoning was not even logical. What gains, materially or emotionally, could have tempted Brown if this were his reason?

---

<sup>1</sup>F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, p. 373.

<sup>2</sup>Villard, op. cit., pp. 171-172.

<sup>3</sup>A. T. Andreas, History of the State of Kansas, p. 895.

<sup>4</sup>Villard, op. cit., pp. 172-185.

<sup>5</sup>Supra, pp. 75-76.

<sup>6</sup>Robinson, op. cit., p. 273.

Later historians could not accept this either. Radical Wilson misrepresented available evidence, juggled it around, and illogically concluded financial gains from the stealing of the victims' horses was the motive for the Pottswatomie Massacre.<sup>1</sup> Even if this were the truth, Wilson's fallible interpretation was far from convincing.

At this time Malin's explanation of Old Man Brown as a man "defeated on all points relative to the expedition (to Lawrence) under the command of his son" appears to be the most plausible. Brown had wanted to fight at Lawrence, even when all the other Free-Staters wished to end the siege by diplomacy to avoid further destruction by a Missouri force that far outnumbered them. He was overruled, and his act "may have been the explosive self-assertion of a frustrated old man--a means by which he might enjoy untrammelled authority and regain his confidence in himself."<sup>2</sup> Also Malin has examined the contemporary documents of the Kansas conflict. He has uncovered new evidence which indicates that very probably John Brown was deeply involved in cattle, land, and townsite controversies; that he urged violent defiance of the pro-slavery "bogus" courts holding sessions in his district; and that he was indirectly involved in disputes over paying taxes in the territorial government. Thus the Pottawatomie Massacre may have been "political assassination, not merely private murder."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-115.

<sup>2</sup>Malin, *op. cit.*, p. 563.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 737-743.



If Brown had intended his brutal massacre to be a righteous deed to aid the Free Staters, it certainly did not turn out that way, for the after-effects were definitely not what he had desired.

The excitement and consternation over the murders in the Osawatomie region was so great that three days after, May 27, 1856, the pro-slavery and anti-slavery men assembled at a public meeting, denounced the action, and resolved to act together for the maintenance of peace and the suppression of similar tragedies. Certain emphatic resolutions were adopted and recorded. To show how disturbed the people were, these resolutions are given here:

Whereas, An outrage of the darkest and foulest nature has been committed in our midst by some midnight assassins unknown, who have taken five of our citizens at the hour of midnight from their homes and families, and murdered and mangled them in the most awful manner; to prevent a repetition of these deeds, we deem it necessary to adopt some measures for our mutual protection and to aid and assist in bringing these desperadoes to justice. Under these circumstances we propose to act up to the following resolutions:

Resolved, That we will from this time lay aside all sectional and political feelings and act together as men of reason and common sense, determined to oppose all men who are so ultra in their views as to denounce men of opposite opinion.

Resolved, That we will repudiate and discountenance all organized bands of men who leave their homes for the avowed purpose of exciting others to acts of violence, believing it to be the duty of all good disposed citizens to stay at home during these exciting times and protect and if possible restore the peace and harmony of the neighborhood; furthermore we will discountenance all armed bodies of men who may come amongst us from any other part of the Territory or from the States unless said parties shall come under the authority of the United States.

Resolved, That we pledge ourselves, individually and collectively, to prevent a recurrence of a similar tragedy and to ferret out and hand over to the criminal authorities the perpetrators for punishment.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that all partisan issues were forgotten and that the people united against a common enemy was not expected by Brown.

"The underlying brotherhood of man asserted itself in unity against an enemy of the human race. But what enemy? John Brown."<sup>2</sup>

In printing the resolutions on June 14, the Kansas Weekly Herald of Leavenworth pointed out that

. . . the outlaws that are now prowling about over the country and murdering harmless and innocent men...have been denounced publicly by persons of their own political opinions, The President of the meeting is a Pro-slavery man, and the Secretary, Free State.<sup>3</sup>

John Brown, Junior, was forced to disband his Free-State militia. His brother, Jason, recorded that the news about Pottawatomie and the fact that his father did it "caused great excitement and fear among the men of our company and a feeling arose against John and myself which led the men all to desert us."<sup>4</sup>

The first reaction of the pro-slavery settlers was to drive all "Yankees" from the Territory. Four days after the murders, the Leavenworth Herald issued a reprint of a "war" extra of a Westport paper. The object of the "extra" was to arouse the border men to commit violence among the Free-Staters. But the men hardly needed any persuasion; on the same day at a pro-slavery

---

<sup>1</sup>Andreas, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>2</sup>Eli Thayer, A History of the Kansas Crusade, Its Friends and Its Foes, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup>Andreas, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>4</sup>Villard, op. cit., p. 151.

meeting, "it was decreed that all persons who had taken an active part as Free-State men must leave the Territory."<sup>1</sup> G. W. Brown also reported this public meeting and gave the details of the resulting drive by the mob as related to him by a lady resident of Leavenworth. She reported that the pro-slavery men declared

. . .that it was impossible for the abolitionists and the pro-slavery settlers to live together in Kansas, and that the former must leave. She said a body of armed men marched through the streets, visiting each dwelling, and ordered every Free-State man, woman, and child to go at once to the levee. They would not allow her even to close her house; but with her children she was marched to the river, where she found hundreds of others. All were forced upon a steamer lying at the levee, including her husband, whom she found there. The Captain was ordered to take these involuntary passengers to Alton, and there leave them. She remained in that city until the spring of 1857, when she returned with her husband, and again settled in the Territory.<sup>2</sup>

The most disastrous effect of the Pottawatomie Massacre was the beginning of civil war between the two factions in a region that was comparatively quiet before May 23, 1856. Pro-slavery men, aroused and angry, retaliated with the added strength of forces from Missouri. Free Staters hurriedly organized to protect themselves against the Missourians. In fact, "the troubles of the Territory had just begun, and the whole summer following was a reign of terror to the harassed settlers."<sup>3</sup> The people "lived in a state of perpetual fear" for they knew not when they would be attacked, their possessions would be stolen, or their homes would go up in flames. "The early settlers suffered...

---

<sup>1</sup>William A. Phillips, The Conquest of Kansas by Missouri and Her Allies, p. 318.

<sup>2</sup>G. W. Brown, Reminiscences of Old John Brown, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup>Frank W. Blackmar, The Life of Charles Robinson, The First State Governor of Kansas, p. 205.

trials and vicissitudes, but there was nothing that quite compared to the indignities of the summer of 1856 immediately following the Pottawatomie massacre."<sup>1</sup> One author makes special mention of this fact for the reason that "there are those who still seem to think that Brown's savage blows protected the people and freed the State from ruffianism" when just the opposite was actually the case.<sup>2</sup>

Old Brown was the personification of an intruding, disruptive force, for the leaders of the Free State movement did not favor aggressive warfare. Their policy of settling the disputes between the two factions by peaceful means had been relatively effective until Brown's murders occurred and the resulting reign of terror followed which definitely hampered the progress they had made toward bringing Kansas into the Union as a free state.<sup>3</sup>

Redpath stated that Brown was also active in this disruptive warfare. "On the 23rd of May, John Brown left the camp of his son, at Osawatomie, with seven or eight men, and from that moment began his guerrilla warfare in Southern Kansas."<sup>4</sup> This guerrilla warfare involved his meeting the Federal troops under the command of Captain Henry Clay Pate in the Black Jack Battle and his contact with Reid and a large number of Missourians in the Osawatomie Battle. The legendary Brown resisted courageously at Black Jack

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>3</sup>Andreas, op. cit., p. 131; John W. Burgess, The Middle Period, 1817-1858, p. 440

<sup>4</sup>James Redpath, The Public Life of Capt. John Brown, p. 117.

and Osawatomie while outnumbered in men and ammunition.<sup>1</sup> At Black Jack, Pate and his men were captured, instead of capturing the Pottawatomie murderers, but Brown's conduct at Osawatomie as a hero has been questioned.<sup>2</sup> However, the fact that all this fighting at Black Jack and Osawatomie was a consequence of the Pottawatomie massacres, whether Brown was a hero in battle or not, is generally not understood. Andreas, an historian, said of Pate:

On hearing of the murders, he set out for Osawatomie with his company, with the design of "capturing or killing old Brown," who was assumed to be the leader of the murdering gang. The old man was in hiding on his arrival. Failing to find him, he took prisoners two of his sons, John Brown, Jr., and Jason...on suspicion of being accessories to the crime. They were charged with murder and put in irons. Other arrests of Free-State men were made and a few cabins burned...Six of Henry Clay Pate's men had that day (June 1st) made a raid on Palmyra, in retaliation for the Pottawatomie massacre, and had taken several prisoners....They then concluded they would go over to Prairie City and take that village also.<sup>3</sup>

Also Reid sought to avenge the murders by driving Brown's men out like a "flock of quail" at Osawatomie.<sup>4</sup>

To create more disturbances and better himself financially, "Brown now robbed and pillaged all around."<sup>5</sup> His excuse was that cattle and horses taken "had originally been Free-State before being purloined by the pro-slavery settlers."<sup>6</sup> That

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 126-157; William Elsey Connelley, John Brown, Vol. II., pp. 157-167.

<sup>2</sup>Andreas, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>4</sup>Villard, op. cit., p. 246.

<sup>5</sup>Burgess, op. cit., p. 441.

<sup>6</sup>Villard, op. cit., p. 238.

Brown and his party moved fast and were not hindered is shown in a biographer's statement that

. . .on Thursday evening, August 28, Brown reached Osawat-  
tomie, travelling slowly because of the one hundred and  
fifty head of cattle he drove before him. Both his company  
and Cline's bivouacked in the town that night. The next  
morning early they divided their plunder and cattle, and  
Brown moved his camp to the high ground north of Osawat-  
tomie. . . .An ordinary commander would have allowed all his men  
to rest. But not John Brown. He was in the saddle all  
day, riding with...his men miles along Pottawatomie Creek,  
whence he crossed to Sugar Creek, returning to Osawat-  
tomie with more captured cattle by way of the Fort Scott trail.<sup>1</sup>

Even Sanborn indicated cattle thievery was one of the acts of  
his hero.<sup>2</sup> Brown's continued robberies during the summer of  
1856 reached excessive proportions, even if he were righteously  
returning Free-State property. Taking advantage of the confu-  
sion and violence of that summer, Brown's most notorious raid  
was made on the store of Joab Bernard near the Douglas-Franklin  
county line. Bernard's estimated losses were exceeding the  
\$4000 mark. "Others who made claims on account of John Brown's  
operations on Ottawa before and after Black Jack include John  
M. Banks, \$950; Jared Chapman, \$1402; and Henry O'Connor,  
\$1360."<sup>3</sup> After careful examination of existing records, Malin  
found

. . .no record of the extent of Brown's robberies, or  
whether he traded or sold part of his take, but his band  
was mounted, clothed, and provisioned at the expense of  
reputed pro-slavery settlers, and there are individual  
instances of free-state settlers benefiting from the  
stolen livestock.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 238

<sup>2</sup>F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, p. 326.

<sup>3</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 590, footnote.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 591.

These were the actual services of a man who purportedly defended and aided in making Kansas free! He "stalked about under various disguises and pretenses," and left the Free-Staters to "suffer for his numerous outrages. At length they compelled him to leave the territory."<sup>1</sup> John Brown left the territory of Kansas for the second time, taking with him young men who followed him to Harper's Ferry, "thus reducing the Free State voting population, on which the freedom of the territory hinged."<sup>2</sup>

#### Did He Lead Raids Against Pro-slavery Men?

But first he perhaps felt he had to justify his previous "outrages"; on December 19, 1858, he kidnapped eleven slaves in Missouri and ran them North by the underground railroad to Canada. But he also "filled his purse" by carrying off from the estates horses, cattle, a wagon, clothing, and oxen, and one of his followers spilled blood by killing one David Cruise.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, John Brown was willing to lead a raid against pro-slavery men, and one of its consequences was a reward of \$3000 put on Old Brown's head by Governor Stewart of Missouri.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Thayer, op. cit., p. 195

<sup>2</sup>G. W. Brown, False Claims of Kansas Historians Truthfully Corrected, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup>G. W. Brown, Reminiscences of Old John Brown, pp. 67-68.

<sup>4</sup>Spring, op. cit., p. 256.

## Was Harper's Ferry Impetus to Civil War?

The legendary assumption that Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry was the spark that ignited the Civil War has been repeatedly contested. However, according to Hinton, Brown "shivered the walls of slavery."<sup>1</sup> In Sanborn's mind, there was "little doubt" that the Harper's Ferry attack "hastened our political crises by at least ten years."<sup>2</sup>

These three partisans had not acknowledged that geographic conditions of the country "which had built up two opposing systems at once of doing and thinking" and which were provided for "by the failure of the framers of the Constitution to fix the exact relation of the several States to the Federal Government." With the undeniable "conflict between free labor and slave labor,...the split was bound to come," but "John Brown had nothing to do with it."<sup>3</sup>

They had not recognized the mourning anti-slavery and Abolitionist feelings of the North and the growing secession agitation in the South. "The South was on the brink of a volcano the day before the blow at Harper's Ferry, as it was the day after."<sup>4</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Theodore Parker, and

---

<sup>1</sup>Supra, pp. 10-12.

<sup>2</sup>F. B. Sanborn, "The Virginia Campaign of John Brown, Atlantic Monthly, March 1875, Part III, 35:323.

<sup>3</sup>Henry Watterson, "An Abortive Hero," North American Review, January 1911, 193:38.

<sup>4</sup>Villard, op. cit., pp. 586-587.



other forceful personalities in the North had begun denouncing the evils of slavery as early as the 1830's. Many Southern leaders, including Governor Wise, were thoroughly committed to the secession movement which "was too far under way" by October, 1859, "for any peaceable solution."<sup>1</sup> Alexander Stephens, one of the Southern leaders, wrote on November 30, 1860,

The truth is our leaders and public men...do not desire to continue it (the Union) on any terms. They do not wish any redress of wrongs, they are disunionists per se and avail themselves of present circumstances to press their object.<sup>2</sup>

To sum it up, the worshippers of the Old Hero "jumped at the unjustifiable conclusion" that the war started "because of John Brown" and ignored

. . .the generation of anti-slavery agitation which had preceded Harpers Ferry, as well as the operation of natural forces, independent of propoganda, which were restricting and diminishing steadily the geographical extent of the peculiar institution.<sup>3</sup>

#### Was Brown Willing to Risk His Life?

The Attack. John Brown startled the entire nation by making a violent attack on slavery at Harper's Ferry in Virginia on October 16, 1859. The next day the first news was most alarming.

The Baltimore Patriot reported:

We learn by telegraph from Frederick that a negro insurrection of a very serious nature had broken out at Harper's Ferry, at 10 o'clock last night; the negroes,

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 587.

<sup>2</sup>Johnston, R. M. and Browne, William Hand, Life of Alexander H. Stephens, p. 367.

<sup>3</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 308.

headed by some 250 whites, supposed to be Abolitionists, and that the insurgents have taken possession of the U. S. Arsenal, carried off a wagon load of rifles, and had sent them over into Maryland. They have also cut the telegraph wires east and west of the Ferry, so as to prevent communication. The information was forwarded from Frederick....

The leader of the party called himself S. C. Anderson, and who had about 200 men, all armed with Minnie rifles, spears and pistols, who said he expected a reinforcement of of 1,500 men by 7 o'clock this morning.

(We are indebted to C. W. Armstrong, Esq., and W. C. Warren, Esq., passengers on the train just in, who have kindly furnished us with this information.)<sup>1</sup>

Later in the day more accurate information was obtained. It became known that Brown was the leader and that his force did not exceed twenty-two men. On the following morning the welcome news came that the United States troops under the command of Colonel Lee had suppressed the insurrection and that most of the insurgents had been killed or taken prisoners.<sup>2</sup> The leader was among the prisoners given trial by the Grand Jury of Jefferson County, a state court of Virginia. His was a separate trial, and on November 2, 1859, he was sentenced to death by Judge Parker, the date of execution to be December 2nd.

After the raid, the South was thrown into a panic of fear and rage,

. . .which indicated that it did not really think that its slave population was as immune from the possibility of insurrection as the eulogists of slavery had thought the slaves to be.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Drew, The John Brown Invasion, An Authentic History of the Harper's Ferry Tragedy, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Rhodes, op. cit., pp. 383-384.

<sup>3</sup>Lyman Abbott, "John Brown, A Review and an Impression," Outlook, February 4, 1911, 97;278.

Ever since the insurrection of 1831 under the direction of Nat Turner, a Negro, the South had feared an insurrection.<sup>1</sup>

His Purpose. Brown's purpose in attacking the Federal arsenal is not definitely known. Sanborn, one of the "secret six," was positive that Brown meant only to hold the village and arsenal a few hours,

. . . make such disposal as he should think best of the government armory and arsenal there, . . . get together the principal persons of the whole neighborhood to be detained as hostages, and then to move forward into the mountains of Virginia, keeping open a communication, if he could, with the mountain region of Maryland and so with the Northern States.<sup>2</sup>

Brown himself had explained after his capture on October 18th that he did not intend to run off any slaves to the mountains of Virginia, but instead he "designed to put arms in their hands to defend themselves against their masters, and to maintain their position in Virginia and the South."<sup>3</sup> A constitution for a Provisional Government had been set up by Captain Brown and his "officers" and other followers in 1858 at Chatham, Canada. He expected the slaves and "non-slave-holding whites" to "flock to his standard . . . at Harper's Ferry," and as his numbers increased, under the Provisional Government,

. . . he would gradually enlarge the area under his control, furnishing a refuge for the slaves, and a rendezvous for all whites who were disposed to aid him, until eventually he overrun the whole South.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Willard, op. cit., p. 436.

<sup>2</sup>F. B. Sanborn, "The Virginia Campaign of John Brown," Atlantic Monthly, December 1875, Part VI, 35:705.

<sup>3</sup>Mason Report, Select Committee on the Harper's Ferry Invasion, Rep. Com. No. 278, June 15, 1860, in Public Document No. 1040, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

John E. P. Daingerfield, a clerk in the armory, was one of Brown's prisoners. When he asked Brown what his object was, he replied, "To free the negroes of Virginia." He added that...by twelve o'clock" noon, he would have fifteen hundred self-emancipated slaves with him, "ready armed."<sup>1</sup>

However, discrepancies appeared in Brown's statements of his intended purpose when he later had time to collect his thoughts and realize what he had revealed. In his speech before the court on November 2nd, he denied everything said in court against him,

. . .but what I have all along admitted,--the design on my part to free the slaves....I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.<sup>2</sup>

When his attention was called to the contradiction of the above statements, he attempted to retract what he had said in court in a letter to Andrew Hunter, special counsel for the state of Virginia:

I intended to convey the idea, that it was my object to place the slaves in a condition to defend their liberties, if they would, without any bloodshed, but not that I intended to run them out of the slave States.<sup>3</sup>

Here again Brown's reliability as a witness does not seem valid when it is known that a large quantity of arms and ammunition, including 102 Sharp's rifles, was found at the Kennedy farm

---

<sup>1</sup>John E. P. Daingerfield, "John Brown at Harper's Forry," Century, June 1885, 8:265.

<sup>2</sup>Villard, op. cit., p. 498.

<sup>3</sup>F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, p. 584.

(Brown's headquarters before the raid) by a company of the Maryland regiment.<sup>1</sup> For what purpose did he plan to use the rifles, if not to arm the slaves?

Failure of the Attack. The slaves and non-slaves-holders whom Brown expected to rally to his support did not appear; in fact the few slaves captured by his men on estates surrounding Harper's Ferry skulked off when they saw the opportunity and returned to their masters. Brown could have avoided capture by the United States militia if he had retreated to the mountains the first four or five hours after daybreak on October 19th. Even though urged to do so by his men, he remained and failed to accomplish his purpose, whether it was to free the slaves or arm them to fight against their masters. He admitted later, "It is by my own folly that I have been taken. I could easily have saved myself from it, had I exercised my better judgment."<sup>2</sup>

But Brown had not used his better judgment in planning the attack; his purpose, whatever it was, was based on ignorance of the actual conditions of slavery around Harper's Ferry and in the South. First of all, the Negro slaves refused to take up arms against their masters. Senator Mason and the rest of the Southerners were relieved that "on the part of the negroes, it is certain that the only emotion evinced by them (during the attack) was one of alarm and terror, and their only refuge sought

---

<sup>1</sup>James Redpath, The Public Life of Capt. John Brown, p. 269.

<sup>2</sup>"Brown's Interview With Mason, Vallandigham, and Others," in F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, p. 562.

at their master's homes."<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the "gentlemen farmers of the Virginia vicinity...lived too far north to cultivate great crops of cotton."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the small number of slaves in the vicinity were mostly house or body servants whose situations were comfortable and "who held to a great degree the confidence of their masters."<sup>3</sup> The most important factor was that Brown and the greater number of the Abolitionists never quite understood the more human aspects of slavery. They saw only the abstract side. The institution violated all justice in their eyes, and they thought every victim of the institution should have been eager to defy his master and become free. For the slave himself, the matter was simply one of convenience or inconvenience. And the master considered the slave in an economic aspect; as a rule, he protected and cared for the slave because he was valuable property.<sup>4</sup> In fact, in the Civil War, many masters marched off to fight, leaving their families and estates in the care of the Negroes for whose liberty the North was fighting.

Therefore, after examination of the conditions of Harper's Ferry and the surrounding region, the logic of such an attack is found wanting. Brown seemed to have no definite plan of what he was going to do after taking over the arsenal and other strategic points. He had planned

---

<sup>1</sup>From New York Herald, October 26, 1859; quoted in Villard, op. cit., p. 469.

<sup>2</sup>Villard, op. cit., p. 428.

<sup>3</sup>Warren, op. cit., p. 331.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 331-332.

. . .no definite place for the men to retreat to, and fixed no hour for the withdrawal from the town. He, moreover, proceeded at once to defy the canons by placing a river between himself and his base of supplies,---the Kennedy Farm,--and then left no adequate force on the river-bank to insure his being able to fall back to that base.<sup>1</sup>

The success of the bold venture seemed to depend on the rising of the slaves, which Brown left wholly to chance as far as is known. He evidently expected a large number of Canadian Negroes to be among the 1500 expected by noon on October 19th. They had been contacted in May, 1858, when the Chatham convention was held, and their failure to respond a year and a half later "seems to be that too great a delay followed after the...convention."<sup>2</sup> The original plans had included attacking Harper's Ferry about a week after the convention.<sup>3</sup>

In view of the evidence, the attack appeared doomed to fail because of a lack of planning on the leader's part. It would seem he was willing to give up his life, for "without foresight, strategy, or generalship, he entered the Harper's Ferry trap confident that all was for the best."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Villard, op. cit., p. 427.

<sup>2</sup>Fred Landon, "Canadian Negroes and the John Brown Raid," Journal of Negro History, April 1921, 6:181.

<sup>3</sup>F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, p. 458.

<sup>4</sup>Villard, op. cit., p. 586.

## THE MAN WITH ASPIRATIONS AND WEAKNESSES

### Explanations For Brown's Actions

To the idealists of New England Brown appeared to be a very different man from the person that he actually was. How is he to be accounted for? And because of the seriousness of committing treason against the Federal government by attacking a government arsenal and because of the improbability of success in attempting an insurrection of slaves, Brown's decision to attack Harper's Ferry and to remain when failure and loss of his life were certain may be questioned. Various conclusions have been drawn in the past.

Insanity. Immediately after the attack Brown was called an insane fanatic. Henry Ward Beecher was among those who believed his frenzy was attributed to the wrongs he and his family had suffered in Kansas.<sup>1</sup> If this were the case, many more Kansas families had more reason to become fanatics because of suffering caused by Brown and his followers. At his trial, the plea of insanity issue was rejected by Brown himself, even though affidavits recorded

. . .nine cases of insanity in the immediate family of John Brown on his mother's side, and six cases among first cousins. To this could be added...two instances among his own children, whose mother...had died insane.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Supra, pp. 53-54.

<sup>2</sup>Warren, op. cit., pp. 418-419.



However, the question of insanity was dismissed by Governor Wise of Virginia and many other laymen, so much so that a medical examination during the trial seemed superfluous. The Governor said:

I know that he was sane and remarkably sane, if quick and clear perception, if assumed rational promises and consecutive reasoning from them, if cautious tack in avoiding disclosures and in covering conclusions and inferences, if memory and conception and practical common sense, and if composure and self-possession are evidence of a sound state of mind.<sup>1</sup>

Monomania. Brown himself justified his attack upon the arsenal by the principle of the Golden Rule:

I pity the poor in bondage that have none to help them: That is why I am here; not to gratify any personal animosity, revenge, or vindictive spirit....We expected no reward except the satisfaction of endeavoring to do for those in distress and greatly oppressed as we would be done by. The cry of distress of the oppressed is my reason, and the only thing that prompted me to come here.<sup>2</sup>

And in his court speech, he let it be impressed upon his listeners that he was prepared to die for the cause against slavery, if need be:

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!<sup>3</sup>

By his own speeches and the legendary family oath against slavery, it would appear that he was a monomaniac devoted to the cause

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 419.

<sup>2</sup>Brown's Interview With Mason, Vallandigham, and Others," in F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, pp. 565-566.

<sup>3</sup>From New York Herald, November 3, 1859; quoted in Villard, op. cit., pp. 498-499.

of freeing the slaves, "ready all his life to die for freedom."<sup>1</sup> His half-brother, Jeremiah, felt John Brown had "changed" since his stays in Kansas. "I had no doubt that he had become insane on the subject of slavery."<sup>2</sup> Some newspapers in Kansas, notably Republican politically, saw Brown as a "monomaniac, with but one thought, one idea, on impulse--vengeance on the slave power,... and revenge on the men who had murdered" his family and friends in Kansas.<sup>3</sup>

After having considered the improbability of his life-long vow against slavery and the disturbing after-effects of his murdering and plundering in Kansas, the idea that he was controlled by one mastering passion or purpose--to fight slavery, because of which he was unable to judge soundly, does not answer the question of why Brown willingly gave his life in a project doomed to fail.

Human Qualities. The failure of the Harper's Ferry project little bothered John Brown; the fact that he had bravely acted in behalf of the Negroes in bondage fully justified his failure. And he had demonstrated to the Abolitionists what could be done against slavery.

Brown's Own Attitudes. While in the Charlestown jail, he knew his life was soon to be taken for treason against the Federal

---

<sup>1</sup>W. D. Howells, "John Brown After Fifty Years," North American Review, January 1911, 193:33.

<sup>2</sup>Courtenay, op. cit., p. 452.

<sup>3</sup>From Atchison Champion, October 22, 1859, quoted in Malin, op. cit., p. 248.

government. But instead of mourning his defeat, he was thankful that his life had been spared at the arsenal, for "he was quick to perceive...what rare good fortune it had been that Lietutenant Green's blade was so ineffective." If Brown had been mortally wounded, "the whole raid must needs have been a few days' wonder and then have been forgotten."<sup>1</sup> (He had not willingly been overwhelmed to sink into oblivion so soon.) However, here was his "opportunity to plead for the right" while in prison, his "one opportunity in a life of nesrly sixty years."<sup>2</sup> And he reconciled himself to his situation, expecting to endure nothing but "hardness," confident that he would "effect a mighty conquest, even though it be like the victory of Samson."<sup>3</sup>

Here in prison he could obtain the victory, the goal he had worked for all his life--an ambition "to be somebody." "He had been driven blindly forward by an uncontrollable desire to do an act."<sup>4</sup> The act had failed because of his lack of planning; here was his chance to redeem the act and himself, his chance to be a success.

Actually, his whole life had been a series of unpredicted failures. This he knew, even when considering his Kansas episodes, although he was shrewd enough not to disclose the facts to his followers. He wanted to be an important man; as his brother-in-

---

<sup>1</sup>Villard, *op. cit.*, p. 471.

<sup>2</sup>F. B. Sanborn, *Life and Letters of John Brown*, p. 444.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 444.

<sup>4</sup>Morse, *op. cit.*, p. 666.

law had said years before in Ohio, "John Brown doted too much on being head of the heap."<sup>1</sup> And each unexpected failure had left him only "surer than even before that...his plans were right."<sup>2</sup> Each "righteous" act was justified by Brown's interpretation of the Bible. His favorite Biblical verse was: "Without blood there shall be no remission of sin." His conception of God was made after his own image," practical, energetic, stern, and inflexible."<sup>3</sup> After examining the marked passages in Brown's pocket Bible, the Reverend Abner C. Hopkins, a citizen of Charlestown who had dressed his wounds, had the opinion that "he was religious, but not Christian; religion was the crutch" or the justification "on which his fanaticism walked."<sup>4</sup>

Brown's ambition to gain prominence was recognized by the Democratic Topeka Tribune. In the November 12, 1859, issue, the editor thought the current headlines "Virginia Attacked," "Insurrection" and others were uncalled for. And he declared:

Ah! gentlemen, think you not old Brown and his foolish associates will thank you for the notice you have given them?--Think you not they have gained just what reckless, unprincipled men most desire--a notoriety that will live, be it ever so mean?<sup>5</sup>

But the whole nation had to recognize Brown's importance to satisfy his desire to be somebody. He had made certain that his letters and papers concerning his plans were left intact at the

---

<sup>1</sup>Warren, op. cit., p. 350.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 429.

<sup>3</sup>Morse, op. cit., p. 662.

<sup>4</sup>Warren, op. cit., p. 434.

<sup>5</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 252.

Kennedy Farm, sure to be found. They were, and through their exposures and the attack itself, he had become "somebody, and his name was in the big print of all the newspapers."<sup>1</sup>

During his month in prison, the old man appeared "more calm, more perfectly possessed, and more dignified than ever before, as if he had tapped some profound secret source of satisfaction."<sup>2</sup> This source was his fulfillment of his ambition, an ambition that could be furthered by his own ability to write letters and speak convincingly of his mission--to free the slaves.

Because he was able to easily convince himself of the validity of Harper's Ferry, Brown wrote, "I feel no consciousness of guilt in the matter, nor even mortification on account of my imprisonment and irons."<sup>3</sup> His persuasive witnessing was revealed when he penned, "Already dear friends at a distance, with kindest sympathy are cheering me with the assurance that posterity, at least, will do me justice."<sup>4</sup> Other fragments from his letters indicate the prisoner well knew where his talents lay and how to use them to link his name with posterity. He compared his plight to that of "Jesus of Nazareth" who "suffered a most excruciating death on the cross as a felon, under the most aggravating circumstances."<sup>5</sup> Then again he saw himself enduring his circumstances for Christ's sake. "To me it is given in behalf

---

<sup>1</sup>Warren, op. cit., p. 415.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 415.

<sup>3</sup>"Words of John Brown," Old South Leaflets, Vol. IV., No. 84, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake."<sup>1</sup>

The shining climax to his mission would be his execution, a dramatic ending to the martyr who dared lay down his life. In a letter to his brother, he stated that he felt "quite cheerful in view of my approaching end,--being fully persuaded that I am worth inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose."<sup>2</sup> His death would not be a defeat; by now he had gained enough insight as to what his name meant among the Northerners as a symbol against slavery. Brown had thrown himself into the character adopted; he had let himself be overcome by what at first was only a superficial hatred of slavery and had so completely convinced himself, that he was ready to die for an ambition achieved. Warren's key to the character of Brown lay in his genius for self-justification. He considered Brown's intensity of nature as a combination of

. . .his egotism, his enormous force of will, his power of endurance, his deliberate cruelties, his deliberate charities, his intolerance, his merciless ambition, and the element of religious fanaticism which worked regularly as a device of self-justification.<sup>3</sup>

This was substantiated by a more impartial judge, who felt that "on his final role," Brown "staked his claims to immortality and worked himself up to a state of religious immolation."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>2</sup>F. B. Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, p. 588.

<sup>3</sup>Warren, op. cit., p. 420.

<sup>4</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 286.

His Human Qualities Forced Him On. In view of all of the evidence thus far, it would be foolhardy to label John Brown a saint or a villain. He can be identified with many individual Browns--personalities bent on their own individual conquests of Harper's Ferris. The universal John Browns have busied themselves for centuries with what seem to be obstacles of society--ignorance, alcohol, war, Facism, currently Communism, and slavery. Brown possessed an unyielding will which he directed to fighting slavery in order to gain prestige and importance. He allowed himself to be overpowered by his own determined, persistent, and unrelenting ambition to be somebody. Because of this, he can be associated with the universal figure who has too much ambition, the person who disregards the admirable human qualities--love, kindness, fairness, honesty, and sincerity. Pushing aside all passions except his intense ambition, he found himself mastered by his weakness, void of reason and conscience.

His first violent act at Pottawatomie was construed to be a blow against slavery by the public. To vindicate himself and prove that it was, he was led on by his desire and iron will to "liberate" eleven slaves in Missouri. In reply to a request for his reasons for entering Missouri, Brown stated that "since 1855" it had been his "deliberate judgment" that the way to successfully oppose slavery "would be to meddle directly with the peculiar institution."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Villard, op. cit., p. 386.

The old man's acts were boldly exaggerated and gloried when told to Easterners, as shown in the growth of the Legend. As a consequence he had become a hero in the eyes of many Northern friends. But action, which he spoke of so much, was demanded against slavery--more action than any small raid into Missouri entailed. Now caught in circumstances he had created, due to the nature of his character, circumstances which were all of a sudden beyond his control, he was virtually forced on to a situation such as found at Harper's Ferry. His human aspiration and also his weakness "to be somebody" had led him to the attack; his amazing ability to justify his circumstances had transformed his weakness into a triumph.

#### THE MAN AND THE LEGEND

The New England philosophers and Abolitionists made a hero out of the man who wanted "to be somebody." The distance of New England from Kansas, the indifference shown to rumors of the atrocities, and the unwillingness of the idealists to see anything but good in man accounted for his hero-worship.

#### The Actor

John Brown was the apotheosis of Abolitionist feelings in the North before and during the Civil War period. The Old Hero's keen perception and shrewd reasoning allowed him to be overcome



by his supposed hatred of slavery, but his plans for attacking the evil were fallible and unsound. However, the old man was a great actor, and he made full use of his talents to persuade his Northern listeners that the cause was the important factor:

Brown in his closing years had the faculty of making men trust and follow him even when he kept them in the dark, a sort of hypnotic power wrought of his own unconquerable will, his faith, simplicity, sincerity and self-forgetting devotion.<sup>1</sup>

Seldom did he reveal his plans, and with reason:

A residence of three or four weeks in the region selected for his operations would have convinced almost any one of them that the undertaking, even as they understood it, was doomed to instant failure.<sup>2</sup>

Yet he was able to make his plans sound logical to his Northern committee, the "secret six," and they contributed enormous amounts of money for the project.<sup>3</sup>

The Old Hero well knew how to capitalize on the intense Abolitionist feelings of the Northerners, and he played his dramatic role to fully satisfy them. Thus, he felt he was fulfilling a need, and here again he could be "somebody."

#### The Man Magnified

The greatest literary interest in the development of the Legend is found among the Abolitionists, for "they made the most direct contribution to Hero-making."<sup>4</sup> And John Brown had the

---

<sup>1</sup>Vallandigham, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>3</sup>*Supra*, p. 42.

<sup>4</sup>Malin, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

makings of the hero to represent the Abolitionist cause.

By Emerson. Literary figures like Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott and anti-slavery leaders like Parker, Phillips, and Beecher cannot be condemned for their part in making the old man a hero. Emerson believed in the essential goodness of all men and in their ability to lead the good life under the guidance of the Inner Voice. In Brown, Emerson thought he had found the man--the living force--to represent this essential goodness, and he was willing to accept what he felt and heard without questioning his hero's actions.<sup>1</sup> Emerson, because of his beliefs and resulting "extraordinary innocence," understood "nothing...about a man...to whom vocabulary was simply a very valuable instrument."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, he believed Brown's embroidered, exaggerated stories and saw him as a "martyr" who would "teach his own race how a man of principle...reconciles thought and action."<sup>3</sup>

By Thoreau. As shown previously, Thoreau openly disregarded and resisted government laws by his actions and by such essays as "Civil Disobedience" and "Life Without Principle." He challenged the Massachusetts government after the Fugitive Slave Bill was passed, for in his opinion it was a government conducted with injustice by man without principle.<sup>4</sup> Thoreau was looking for a man with principle, and he found his man in John Brown, a man

---

<sup>1</sup>Supra, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup>Warren, op. cit., p. 246.

<sup>3</sup>Joy K. Talbert, John Brown in American Literature. Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Kansas, Vol. 1., p. 201.

<sup>4</sup>Supra, p. 27.

who disregarded national laws in deference to a principle for which he was willing to fight, a man who exemplified individual resistance, a man who was the nucleus of Thoreau's philosophy.

In "The Last Days of John Brown," he explained:

Men have been hung in the South before for attempting to rescue slaves, and the North was not much stirred by it. When, then, this wonderful difference? We were not so sure of their devotion to principle.<sup>1</sup>

The Old Hero had come East from bleeding Kansas to find financial support. He and his sons had risked their lives almost daily in the attempt to keep Kansas free, and he was a fanatic in the cause of freedom. Here was a brave, honest, and indomitable man, "a man of principles and action, a superior man," and "he must needs acclaim this Man."<sup>2</sup>

Because of their philosophic theories, both Emerson and Thoreau had no defenses against a shrewd zealot like Brown. In their eyes every man was a noble human being, and Brown played his part so well that he became the exemplification of their belief in the innate goodness of man.

By Alcott. Here again Alcott was the reporter; in his Journals he recorded the complete faith of his friends in a man who "leaves us much in the dark concerning his destination and designs." In his two appearances at Concord, Brown, however, did not "conceal his hatred of slavery nor his readiness to

<sup>1</sup>Thoreau, op. cit., p. 443.

<sup>2</sup>Joy K. Talbert, John Brown In American Literature. Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Kansas, Vol. I., p. 195.

strike a blow for freedom at the proper moment." Even though the Old Hero did not unfold his plans before his Concord admirers, the mild Alcott also found Brown "equal to anything he dares,..and with the martyr's temper and purpose."<sup>1</sup> Brown was well-qualified for the dramatic role he chose as demonstrated by Alcott's Journals.

By Parker. Even ministers and agitators were convinced by his performances. Theodore Parker was a man of action who had made the Church an instrument for social reform of slavery. He respected "no supreme law but that made by God," and he fought the Fugitive Slave Bill and its supporters from his pulpit.<sup>2</sup> His actions and beliefs made Parker feel akin to another man who also believed in the Higher Law and resisted the Constitution by action and bloodshed. Brown had resisted the "bogus laws" in Kansas, and the Virginian laws, because they sanctioned slavery, were also "bogus" to him. The acts of John Brown fitted Parker's doctrine admirably:

No doctrine had ever been dearer to New England than the doctrine of the "higher law." This is an invisible and unwritten law which each man must find for himself, read and interpret for himself, and obey in his own way. If it leads him to disobey certain human enactments, so much the better; if it even leads him to treason and rebellion against his country, he at least is right, however wrong his acts may seem in the eyes of men.<sup>3</sup>

By Phillips. The chief orator of the anti-slavery cause, Wendell Phillips, believed in John Brown as the hero of his

---

<sup>1</sup>Shepard, op. cit., p. 315.

<sup>2</sup>Supra, pp. 37-39.

<sup>3</sup>Utter, op. cit., p. 435.

cause, believed in him so much that he declared Brown was twenty-five miles from the scene of the Pottawatomie Massacre when it occurred.<sup>1</sup> And he realized the impact of such a sincere personality, such a persuasive power; Brown was the human symbol of what he had been agitating for almost thirty years. Phillips beheld Brown as the man who could crush slavery by his rifles and by his eloquence.<sup>2</sup>

By Beecher. Another minister, Henry Ward Beecher, did not approve of Brown's methods as a means to abolish slavery. Instead, Brown the actor appealed to Beecher's own dramatic flair. The Old Hero's Harper's Ferry scene and his prison scene revealed vast possibilities.<sup>3</sup> Brown, the blunderer hanged by Virginia, would be a success as the actor immortal.

#### The Man Magnified Into a Hero and a Legend

Nor can the North as a whole be judged and found guilty for making a hero and a legend out of the man. Many who listened to Emerson and Thoreau lacked "the profound spiritual convictions" and the "intellectual penetration" of these men and had allowed their emotions to overcome any restraint or tolerance they may have had:

---

<sup>1</sup>"Wendell Phillips on the Puritan Principle," discourse delivered before the Twenty-eighth Congregational Society, (Rev. Theodore Parker's), Music Hall, Boston, December 18, 1859, in James Redpath, Echoes of Harper's Ferry, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Supra, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup>Supra, pp. 54-55.

They seized upon this abuse or that, exaggerated its manifestation and misunderstood its significance, and set out to reform the world, without knowledge of the causes of the evil and without wisdom to form policies that would really correct abuses. Reformers of this type followed Emerson and Thoreau in the apotheosis of John Brown.<sup>1</sup>

Rumors of such atrocities as the Pottawatomie Massacre floated back to New Englanders, but shoulders were shrugged and the brutal act was disregarded:

The truth is that the Pottawatomie massacre was so at variance with the whole course and policy of the free-State party in Kansas up to that time that its horrible details were not credited in the East....The previous good character (of the party) prevented the country from believing that the killing done in their name by one of their number was an unprovoked massacre.<sup>2</sup>

Besides disbelieving the details of the massacre, they never fully realized "the connection between the Harper's Ferry leader and the tragedy of May 24, 1856." And they were never interested enough to ask for details, "so abounding was the faith in himself which the mere appearance of the man created."<sup>3</sup>

Little attention was given to what acts John Brown had actually participated in while in Kansas or why he attempted such an illogical, impossible plan of freeing the slaves for two reasons. Brown's driving zeal to be somebody, his genius for self-justification, and his ability to play the role demanded of him have been illustrated. Moreover, few people were well-informed about the kind of man Brown was or even cared to know.

---

<sup>1</sup>Joy K. Talbert, John Brown In American Literature. Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Kansas, Vol I., p. 41.

<sup>2</sup>Rhodes, op. cit., pp. 199-200.

<sup>3</sup>Villard, op. cit., p. 274.

Secondly, John Brown's story was heard in a period "when the world was eager for a hero and when the people of the northern United States must make one of whatever material came to hand."<sup>1</sup> Brown, the zealot, was the material at hand out of which each person created a hero "to suit the occasion." The man himself interested them little as is seen in their expressions; "he interested them only as the fulfillment of their imaginary drama."<sup>2</sup> Their primary consideration was that he could be molded into their own desired images or idols. Historic circumstances demanded a hero also. History records the end of a cycle bringing economic collapse in the United States and Europe, and

. . .the climax of social reform, the national unification movements by means of blood and iron in Italy, Germany and the United States. A frustrated generation of youth found its opportunity in an outpouring of emotion upon a cause or a man....The Civil War was the climax of the cycle in the United States and it was American youth which caught up the banner of nationalism and abolition. John Brown became its first Hero, and had no serious rival until the assassin's bullet added the martyred Lincoln.<sup>3</sup>

Their belief in the goodness of human nature appeared to have betrayed Emerson, Thoreau, and other influential men of New England into accepting Brown. They along with the North as a whole evidently were indifferent to the facts about the man when they came upon them. The time and the conditions of the North demanded a hero to represent the cause, to satisfy the excited agitations built up over a period of time, and Brown

---

<sup>1</sup>Utter, op. cit., p. 435.

<sup>2</sup>Malin, op. cit., p. 287.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 292.

happened along at the opportune period in history. His human desire to be an important person led him on to commit irresponsible acts of violence, and his ability to rationalize these acts made of his human failing a victory, even in death.

Therefore, the circumstances of the contemporary times, the beliefs of certain literary men, and the intense emotions of the North plus the personality of a zealot determined "to be somebody" made John Brown the legendary hero that he is today.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to express her sincere thanks to Dr. Homer C. Combs, her major professor, for the advice and guidance furnished throughout the preparation of this manuscript. Thanks are also due Dr. Earle R. Davis for his inspiration and suggestions. Also his aid in making available assistantships was most valuable.

Appreciation is expressed to Prof. A. D. Miller for enthusiastically encouraging the author to investigate the character of John Brown.

The Kansas Historical Society of Topeka, Kansas, was most helpful in obtaining certain documentary evidence included in the text. The author also extends her thanks to Prof. John F. Helm of his Curry print and to several members of the English Department who encouraged and advised her in the research.

And finally she wishes to express her deep gratitude to her husband, Ellsworth B. Beetch, without whose encouragement and enthusiasm she could not have undertaken or completed this thesis.

## LITERATURE CITED

## Books

- Andreas, A. T. History of the State of Kansas. Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883.
- Beecher, Henry Ward. Freedom and War, Discourses on Topics Suggested by the Times. Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1863.
- Benet, Stephen Vincent. John Brown's Body. New York: Rinehart & Co., 1928.
- Bennett, Whitman. Whittier, Bard of Freedom. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941.
- Blackmar, Frank W. The Life of Charles Robinson, The First State Governor of Kansas. Topeka, Kansas: Crane & Co., 1901.
- Brown, G. W. False Claims of Kansas Historians Truthfully Corrected. Rockford, Illinois: G. W. Brown, 1902.
- Reminiscences of Old John Brown. Rockford, Illinois: Abraham E. Smith, 1880.
- Burgess, John W. The Middle Period, 1817-1858. American History Series. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897.
- Cabot, James Elliot. A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Two volumes. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1887.
- Canby, Henry Seidel. Thoreau. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1939.
- Channing, William Ellery. Memoir of William Ellery Channing. Three volumes. Boston: Wm. Crosby and H. P. Nichols, 1848.
- Commager, Henry Steele. Theodore Parker. Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1936.
- Connelley, William Elsey. John Brown. Twentieth Century Classics and School Readings. Two volumes. Topeka, Kansas: Crane & Co., 1900.
- Drew, Thomas. The John Brown Invasion, An Authentic History of the Harper's Ferry Tragedy. Boston: James Campbell, 1859.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Emerson's Complete Works. Six volumes. Harvard Edition. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1917.

- Frothingham, O. B. Life of Theodore Parker. Boston: J. R. Osgood & Co., 1874.
- Hibben, Paxton. Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait. New York: Press of the Readers Club, 1942.
- Hinton, Richard J. John Brown and His Men, With Some Account of the Roads They Traveled to Reach Harper's Ferry. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1894.
- Howard, Leon. Victorian Knight-Errant, a Study of the Early Literary Career of James Russell Lowell. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1952.
- Hubbard, Elbert. Time and Chance. A Romance and a History: Being the Story of the Life of a Man. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901.
- Johnston, R. M. and Browne, William Hand. Life of Alexander H. Stephens. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1878.
- Karsner, David. John Brown, Terrible 'Saint'. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1934.
- Kuntz, Stanley J. and Haycraft, Howard, editors. American Authors, 1600-1900. New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1938.
- Lindsay, Vachel. Collected Poems by Vachel Lindsay. New York: Macmillan Co., 1925.
- Longfellow, Samuel. Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow With Extracts from his Journals and Correspondence. Three volumes. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1891.
- Malin, James C. John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1942.
- Parker, Theodore. Additional Speeches, Addresses, and Occasional Sermons. Two volumes. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1855.
- Parrington, Vernon Louis. Main Currents in American Thought. Three volumes. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1927.
- Perry, Bliss, editor. The Heart of Emerson's Journals. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1926.
- Phillips, Wendell. Speeches, Lectures, and Letters. Two volumes. Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1891.
- Phillips, William A. The Conquest of Kansas by Missouri and Her Allies. Boston: Phillips, Sampson & Co., 1856.
- Pillsbury, Parker. Acts of the Anti-Slavery Apostles. Boston: Cupples, Upham & Co., 1883.

- Redpath, James, editor. Echoes of Harper's Ferry. Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Public Life of Capt. John Brown. Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860.
- Rhodes, James Ford. History of the United States From The Compromise of 1850. Eight volumes. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892.
- Robinson, Charles. The Kansas Conflict. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892.
- Rusk, Ralph L., editor. The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Six volumes. New York: Columbia University Press, 1939.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949.
- Sanborn, F. B. The Life and Letters of John Brown. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1885.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Recollections of Seventy Years. Two volumes. Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1909.
- Sandburg, Carl. Cornhuskers. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1918.
- Shepard, Odell, editor. The Journals of Bronson Alcott. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1938.
- Spiller, Robert E., and others, editors. Literary History of the United States. New York: Macmillan Co., 1953.
- Spring, Leverett Wilson. Kansas, The Prelude to the War for the Union. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1913.
- Stedman, Edmund Clarence. The Poetical Works of Edmund Clarence Stedman. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1884.
- Talbert, Joy K. John Brown in American Literature. Two volumes. Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Kansas, 1941.
- Thayer, Eli. A History of The Kansas Crusade, Its Friends and Its Poes. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889.
- Thoreau, Henry D. Thoreau's Complete Works. Four volumes. Concord Edition. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1929.
- Torrey, Bradford, and Allen, Francis H., editors. The Journals of Henry D. Thoreau. Thirteen volumes. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1949.

- Villard, Oswald Garrison. John Brown 1800-1859, A Biography Fifty Years After. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1910.
- Vincent, Howard, editor. Collected Poems of Herman Melville. Chicago: Packard & Co., 1947.
- Ware, Eugene Fitch. Rhymes of Ironquill. Topeka, Kansas: Kellam Book and Stationery Co., 1889.
- Warren, Robert Penn. John Brown, The Making of a Martyr. New York: Payson and Clarke, 1929.
- Weiss, John. Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker. Two volumes. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1864.
- West, Rebecca, editor. Selected Poems of Carl Sandburg. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926.
- Whittier, John Greenleaf. The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier. Cabinet Edition. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1892.
- Wilson, Hill Peebles. John Brown Soldier of Fortune, a Critique. Lawrence, Kansas: Hill P. Wilson, 1913.

#### PERIODICALS AND PAMPHLETS

- Abbott, Lyman. "John Brown, A Review and an Impression." Outlook, February 4, 1911, 97:273-278.
- Atkinson, Eleanor. "The Soul of John Brown." American Magazine, October 1909, 68:633-643.
- Bradford, Gamaliel. "John Brown." Atlantic, November 1922, 80: 645-656.
- Brown, Salmon. "My Father, John Brown." Outlook, January 25, 1913, 103:212-217.
- Carruth, William Herbert. "Hero of Harper's Ferry." Review of Reviews, November 1892, 6:492.
- Courtenay, Austin M. "The Actual John Brown." The Chautauquan, January 1897, 24:446-453.
- Daingerfield, John E. P. "John Brown at Harper's Ferry." Century, June 1895, 8:265-267.
- Fuller, Edward. "Mr. Villard's 'John Brown.'" Bookman, February 1911, 32:630-631.

- Gould, Elizabeth Porter. "John Brown at North Elba." Outlook, November 21, 1896, 54:909-911.
- Howells, W. D. "John Brown After Fifty Years." North American Review, January 1911, 193:26-34.
- Jenks, Leland H. "The John Brown Myth." American Mercury, March 1924, 1:267-273.
- "John Brown Fifty Years After Osawatomis." Nation, September 6, 1906, 83:194-195.
- Kimball, George. "Origin of the John Brown Song." New England Magazine, December 1889, New Series 1:271-377.
- Landon, Fred. "Canadian Negroes and the John Brown Raid." Journal of Negro History, April 1921, 6:174-182.
- Le Page, Samuel M. "Memories of John Brown of Osawatomis." Current History, June 1928, 28:427-430.
- Martin, Geo. W., editor. Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1897-1900, Volume 6. Topeka: W. Y. Morgan, 1900.
- "Mason Report." Select Committee on the Harper's Ferry Invasion, Rep. Com. No. 278, June 15, 1860, in Public Document No. 1040, Index to the Reports of the Committees of the Senate of the United States for First Session of the Thirty-Sixth Congress. Washington: George W. Bowman, 1860.
- Monroe, Harriet. "A Cinema Epic." Poetry, November 1928, 33: 91-96.
- Morse, John T. Jr. "John Brown Fifty Years After." Atlantic Monthly, November 1910, 106:662-668.
- Newhall, Falea Henry. The Conflict in America. A Funeral Discourse occasioned by the death of John Brown of Ossawatomis published in pamphlet form. Boaton: J. M. Hewes, 1859.
- Ostrander, Gilman M. "Emerson, Thoreau, and John Brown." Mississippi Valley Historical Review, March 1953, 39:713-726.
- Old South Leaflets. Volume 4, numbers 76-100. Boaton: Directors of the Old South Work, n. d.
- "Review of John Brown Soldier of Fortune by Hill Peebles Wilson." Mississippi Valley Historical Review, September 1914, 1:320-323.

- Sanborn, F. B. "The Virginia Campaign of John Brown." Atlantic Monthly, Part I, January 1875, 55:16-24.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Virginia Campaign of John Brown." Atlantic Monthly, Part III, March 1875, 35:323-331.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Virginia Campaign of John Brown." Atlantic Monthly, Part VI, December 1875, 35:704-721.
- Shackleton, Robert Jr. "What Support Did John Brown Rely Upon?" Magazine of American History, April 1893, 29:348-359.
- Taft, S. H. A Discourse on the Character and Death of John Brown. Published in pamphlet form. Des Moines: Steam Printing House of Carter, Hussey, and Curl, 1872.
- Tate, Allen. "The Irrepressible Conflict." Nation, September 19, 1928, 127:274.
- Utter, David N. "John Brown of Osawatomic." North American Review, November 1883, 137:435-446.
- Vallandigham, E. N. "John Brown--Modern Hebrew Prophet." Putnam's Magazine, December 1909, 7:238-297.
- Watterson, Henry. "An Abortive Hero." North American Review, January 1911, 193:35-46.

JOHN BROWN--THE LEGEND AND THE MAN

by

CLAIRE LARSON BEECH

B. S., Mankato State Teachers College  
Mankato, Minnesota, 1950

---

AN ABSTRACT OF

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of English

KANSAS STATE COLLEGE  
OF AGRICULTURE AND APPLIED SCIENCE

1954



John Brown has been used as the unifying element in Paul Gregory's unique stage production of John Brown's Body and in Stephen Vincent Benet's volume of narrative verse from which the stage show was taken. More should be known about this man vaguely connected with Harper's Ferry and Kansas, this man who generally is recognized as a saint, a martyr, and a hero.

In the thesis the Legend built around Brown's name by the North was illustrated. Because Brown's personality and oratory greatly swayed many prominent men of the East, his influence on certain literary figures of New England was investigated, and some examples from the vast amount of literature written around the John Brown theme were given. An attempt was made to show why the Legend should not be accepted as history by disclosing documentary evidence to the contrary, and finally a possible explanation for the man and the Legend was advanced.

The Northern Legend that is generally recognized today is the Legend of John Brown as the hero of Kansas, and especially Osawatomie, the liberator of slaves, and the martyr of the Abolitionists. Such literary men as Emerson, Longfellow, and Beecher eulogized Brown while he still lived. After his death, ministers expounded on the heroism, courage, and faith of Brown. "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave" became popular as a Civil War marching song, and Redpath, Sanborn, Hinton, and Connelley helped considerably to mould the Legend by praising their hero, Brown, in their biographies. The memory of Brown was preserved in Kansas, especially at Osawatomie where he had lived for a short time and had fought pro-slavery men. In 1906 a semi-

centennial celebration of the Osawatomie Battle was held, and in 1935 a bronze statue of Brown was unveiled by the residents. The Legend was developed further by the Brown family, especially in later years, and Villard was one of the later biographers whose sympathies were with Brown.

Desiring to meet the New England poets, writers, thinkers, and financiers who leaned toward Abolitionism, John Brown went East from Kansas in 1857. He was so successful in obtaining good will and solicitations that he returned in 1859. Among those whom he met were men reluctant to leave their secluded cloisters to voice opinions on political questions. Even more reluctant were they to open their purses to just any appeal. Yet Brown saw many doors and purses opened wholeheartedly. Eminent literary men--Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry D. Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott--were impressed by Brown's eloquence and appearance. Notable clergymen and orators--Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips, and Henry Ward Beecher--added their weight to his appeals for Kansas and slavery,

Old Brown had a strange way of making other people believe what he said, and Emerson was one of those who believed. He entertained Brown in his home in 1857 and was deeply touched by the later Harper's Ferry incident. In numerous lectures and essays, Emerson requested aid for Brown's family after the incident and openly championed the martyr's cause. Eloquent statements of Brown's saintly qualities may be read in his essays on "Courage" and "Eloquence," his lecture on "Memory," and "Abraham Lincoln," all found in Emerson's complete works.

Thoreau was another of Brown's devoted Concord admirers.

Because of his resistance to a government which he did not approve of and his protest of the Fugitive Slave Bill, Thoreau was attracted to Brown who represented violent resistance against that which was unjust--slavery. And Harper's Ferry exemplified his philosophy of individual resistance. In his well-known "Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau declared that "it was through his agency, far more than any other's, that Kansas was made free." Both Emerson and Thoreau, by their eloquent assertion of Brown's saintliness, undoubtedly contributed much to the making of the Legend. Thus the Legend marched on, aided in part by two prominent literary men of the day.

Alcott's reactions to slavery and John Brown were so intermingled with those of his close friends, that he often recorded the daily activities of Emerson and Thoreau in his Journals. He was profoundly impressed by his only meeting with Brown, but his testimonies to the virtues of Brown were moderate in comparison to those of his associates. Perhaps his coolheaded observations on the activities and attitudes of his Concord friends are of more importance today in authenticating in part the impact of Brown's influence on certain New Englanders.

Ministers and professional agitators also took up the cry for Brown and against slavery. Among the ministers was Parker, New England's foremost anti-slavery preacher. Parker's effort to bring reform back into the Church, his belief in the Higher Law, and his attack on the Fugitive Slave Law led him to listen to Brown. He became one of the "secret six" who supported Brown with substantial monetary funds and considerable influence in his

attacks against slavery. The powerful influence of this orator was a great asset to Brown, who often appealed to him and through him for financial aid.

Phillips, a professional agitator and orator, was another unqualified admirer of Brown. He championed the anti-slavery movement with his wealth and eloquence, and Harper's Ferry aroused his imagination. Now the oratory of the hour was resistance to the tyrants of government and obedience to a Higher Law. A dignified and lofty eulogy spoken by Phillips was part of the last services held for Brown, and such statements of his as "he had abolished slavery in Virginia" became part of the Legend.

Beecher unwittingly added his name to the support of Brown. Numerous pledges of Sharp's rifles from various clergymen of New England including twenty-five from Beecher's church were made to help New Englanders migrating to Kansas to protect themselves. Suddenly Beecher, never more than a lukewarm Abolitionist, was allied with the extreme Abolitionists. The Sharp's rifles shipped to Kansas by well-meaning New Englanders were labeled "Beecher's Bibles" by superficial people, and the label stuck. It was rumored that Brown carried one of "Beecher's Bibles" in his Harper's Ferry raid. Beecher did not approve of the Hero's methods, but he realized the possibilities of immortalizing Brown, the failure, as Brown, the Martyr; again another powerful contemporary became a builder of the Legend.

A comprehensive study of John Brown as a literary theme has been made by Talbert. This author has emphasized the fact that the Legend of Brown has been the material out of which the literature

has come, and this historically inaccurate literature has in turn affected the course of the development of the Legend. The Harper's Ferry episode produced an amazing quantity of verse and fiction, but few authors have been inspired to write their best work on the John Brown theme.

The Southern Legend was in reality an attack on the man. Newspaper men, ministers, historians, literary critics, and biographers--Wilson and Warren--questioned, attacked, and minimized the apotheosis of John Brown. The history of Brown's life and activities was examined to discover why the man was attacked.

Brown may have gone to Kansas in 1855 to engage in his campaign against slavery or to improve his financial prospects. His participation in the Pottawatomie Massacre in Kansas on May 23, 1856, long denied by some hero-worshippers and justified by others, was positively affirmed by documentary evidence. If Brown had intended his brutal massacre of five men during the night to be a righteous deed to aid the Free-Staters, it certainly did not turn out that way, for the after-effects were definitely not what he had desired. Pro-slavery settlers of the Territory resolved to drive the "Yankees" out of the country, and the summer following was a reign of terror, the beginning of civil war between the two factions in a region that was comparatively quiet before May 23rd. The legendary Brown resisted courageously in battles that followed at Black Jack and Osawatomie. However, the fact that all this fighting was a consequence of the Pottawatomie Massacre is generally not understood. After this Brown robbed and pillaged all

around, a fact which was admitted even by partial biographers.

To the idealists of New England Brown appeared to be a very different man from the person that he actually was; therefore, how was he to be accounted for? Because of the seriousness of committing treason against the Federal government and the improbability of success in attempting his insurrection of slaves, Brown's decisions to attack Harper's Ferry and to remain when failure and loss of his life were certain were questioned. Various conclusions had been drawn in the past including insanity and monomania to explain the man and his actions.

The author felt that the failure of Harper's Ferry little bothered Brown. In prison he could obtain the victory, the goal he had worked for all his life--an ambition "to be somebody." His whole life had been a series of unpredicted failures, even when considering his Kansas episodes, and he had justified each act by his own interpretation of the Bible. Now his execution would be the climax to his ambition to be recognized; it would be a dramatic ending for the martyr who dared lay down his life.

In view of all the evidence, it would be foolhardy to label Brown as a saint or a villain. He can be identified with many individual Browns--personalities bent on their own individual conquests or Harper's Ferries. He allowed himself to be overpowered by his own determined, persistent, and unrelenting ambition. Pushing aside all passions except his intense ambition, he found himself mastered by his weakness, void of reason and conscience. His first violent act at Pottawatomie was construed to be a blow against slavery by the public. To prove that it was, he was led on by his desire to liberate eleven slaves in Missouri and to

exaggerate and glorify his acts for Eastern listeners. But action was demanded against slavery by his listeners. Now caught in circumstances he had created but which were all of a sudden beyond his control, he was virtually forced on to a situation such as found at Harper's Ferry. His human aspiration and also his weakness "to be somebody" had led him to the attack; his amazing ability to justify his circumstances had transformed his weakness into a triumph.

The New England philosophers and Abolitionists made a hero out of the man who wanted "to be somebody." The distance of New England from Kansas, the indifference shown to rumors of the atrocities, and the unwillingness of the idealists to see anything but good in man accounted for this hero-worship. The greatest literary interest in the development of the Legend was found among the Abolitionists. Emerson thought he had found the man--the living force--to represent his belief in the essential goodness in man, and he was willing to accept what he felt and heard without questioning Brown's actions. Thoreau was looking for a man with principle, and he found his man in John Brown, a man who disregarded national laws in deference to a principle for which he was willing to fight, a man who exemplified individual resistance and was the nucleus of Thoreau's philosophy. Alcott was the reporter; in his Journals he recorded the complete faith of his friends in a man who did not reveal his plans, only his cause. Parker's own actions against slavery and his belief in the Higher Law made him feel akin to Brown who also believed in the Supreme Law and resisted the Constitution by action and bloodshed. Phillips realized the impact

of such a sincere personality, such a persuasive power; Brown was the human symbol of what he had been agitating for almost thirty years. Beecher did not approve of his methods, but Brown the actor appealed to his own dramatic flair.

Their belief in the goodness of human nature appeared to have betrayed Emerson, Thoreau, and other influential men of New England into accepting Brown. They along with the North as a whole evidently were indifferent to the facts about the man when they came upon them. The time and conditions of the North demanded a hero to represent the cause, to satisfy the excited agitations built up over a period of time, and Brown happened along at the opportune period in history. His human desire to be an important person led him to commit irresponsible acts of violence, and his ability to rationalize these acts made of his human failing a victory, even in death.

Therefore, the circumstances of the contemporary time, the beliefs of certain literary men, and the intense emotions of the North plus the personality of a zealot determined "to be somebody" made John Brown the legendsry hero that he is today.