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Merrill D. Peterson. *John Brown: The Legend Revisited*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2002. x + 196 pp. \$23.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2132-7; \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-2308-6.

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Remembering John Brown

John Brown has been the focus of important historical scholarship in recent years. A major new biography by David Reynolds (*John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*) was published in 2005. In 2002, John Stauffer's *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* reassessed Brown's relationship with other abolitionists and showed that his approach blurred racial categories. Most importantly, Stauffer grappled with the moral and political dilemmas involved in using violence in pursuit of freedom. Likewise, in 2004 Franny Nudelman's *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence, and the Civil War* focused on the meanings of using violence for political ends. Brown's martyrdom, she argues, came to be used "to sustain the state in wartime."^[1]

Anyone wishing to consider Brown and the issues raised by his life and death can do no better than to start with Merrill D. Peterson's *John Brown: The Legend Revisited*. Peterson is one of our foremost Jefferson scholars, and he has approached the changing images of historical figures before in works on Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. He tells us this brief book "is an extended meditation on the life of John Brown and his place in American thought and imagination from the time of his death in 1859 to the near-present" (p. xi). Peterson's intent is to survey the work of historians, novelists, painters, and others to discover how Americans have tried to make sense of Brown.

The main lines of John Brown's story have long been known. But they have never been told as clearly as they are in Peterson's first chapter, a masterpiece of succinct and insightful writing. Brown moved constantly, pursued a variety of occupations, but always found it difficult to make financial headway. One wife and several children died. His deep religious faith along with his own misfortunes increasingly led him to sympathize with the plight of African American slaves. "Brown's empathy with blacks was the most remarkable feature of his

character," Peterson argues. He came to believe that he had a "divine mission: to free the country of slavery" (p. 5). In 1848 he moved to a mixed-race settlement in the Adirondacks and devoted himself, more or less full time, to that cause. He aided African Americans on their way to Canada and contemplated establishing a permanent underground railway line along the ridge of the Appalachians to bring slaves to freedom.

After 1854, the doctrine of popular sovereignty led to an often violent struggle between northern free-soilers and southern masters for the future of Kansas; Brown and several adult sons moved there, bringing their hatred of slavery with them. In 1855, incensed by pro-slave violence, Brown "presided over the murder" of five slave-state settlers at Pottawatomie Creek (p. 6). The next year one of Brown's sons was killed in a skirmish with "Border Ruffians" in which Brown and his men were greatly outnumbered. Peterson quotes Brown's response: "There will be no peace in this land until slavery is done for. I will give them something else to do than extend slave territory. I will carry the war to Africa" (p. 6).

In pursuit of this aim Brown left Kansas to get funding and support from abolitionist allies for a plan to capture the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. He hoped that once the armory was secured significant numbers of slaves would join his small band of men (which included both blacks and whites, and three of his sons). Part of the group would stay in the south and establish mountain bases from which to free slaves. Several prominent northern abolitionists secretly gave him some aid and encouragement, although no one seems to have "understood ... in detail" his invasion plan. Frederick Douglass "thought it suicidal and declined" to join Brown (p. 9).

The October 1859 raid failed and several men, including two of Brown's sons, were killed. A wounded John Brown was captured, tried, and executed in early December. At his trial, he stated, "I never intended to murder or

treason or the destruction of property or to excite Slaves to rebellion” (p. 14). He merely meant to free them. Yet, by the time of his execution, he seemed to retreat from the notion that freedom might come without violence. “I am now quite *certain*, he wrote, “that the crimes of this *guilty land*: will never be purged away; but with Blood” (p. 21). These statements and the extensive communication Brown had with sympathizers while in jail thrust him into national consciousness and helped further polarize the nation.

Peterson sees the last month of his life as the key to Brown’s historical importance. “He would become defined by his martyrdom. The manner of his death was infinitely more important than his life.” Because of this, Peterson argues, “it is impossible to separate the record of his life—the biography if you will—from the legend gathering round him” (p. 171). I am not convinced this is totally the case. Works such as Stauffer’s indicate there is much to be learned from a detailed reconstruction of Brown’s life itself. Yet, it is undeniable that Brown’s “legend” became a major factor in the coming of the war. And Peterson’s book is convincing in discussing the persistent fascination with Brown since 1860.

In five brisk chapters Peterson discusses the ways Americans have remembered Brown. In chapter 2, Peterson tells us that the song “John Brown’s Body” (1861) was composed by union soldiers from Massachusetts, set to the tune of a Methodist hymn. Julia Ward Howe (wife of one of the men who secretly supported the Harpers Ferry raid) was urged to write new words to the song. In her “Battle Hymn of the Republic” (1862), God, not John Brown, is the main actor—but the same martial spirit prevails. Most interestingly, Peterson discusses the numerous Northern localities that came to associate themselves with Brown through memories and monuments in the years following the war. Brown was not yet controversial in the North and communities were proud to identify with him and the antislavery cause.

In the postwar years the legend became complicated; this is the focus of chapter 3. Moderate Kansas Republicans began to re-tell the Potawatomie story in ways that painted Brown as a murderer whose impact was only to “unleash a wave of retaliation by the pro-slavery forces” (p. 63). There was still plenty of pro-Brown sentiment in the North, but by and large Americans were not sure what to think about him. “Without having made up their collective mind about John Brown,” Peterson writes, “the American people remained interested in him. He was the great enigma of the Civil War” (p. 73). Peterson might have considered at greater length the larger reasons for Brown’s enigmatic status. It is likely that

uncertainty about Brown signified uncertainty about the meaning of the war itself. Seeing him in that larger context would help us better appreciate the importance of the shifts in the Brown legend.

The centerpiece of chapter 4 is a discussion of Oswald Garrison Villard’s sympathetic 1910 biography (*John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After*). “A meticulously researched work of 700 pages, it was the greatest American historical biography yet written,” Peterson concludes (p. 86). Peterson uses a discussion of the biography to look at some crucial episodes in Brown’s career, including the raid at Harpers Ferry and Villard’s conclusion that the “arsenal adventure was a death trap, yet Brown and his men were ready to sacrifice their lives on the altar of liberty” (p. 95).

In the first half of the twentieth century, Brown was the subject of numerous poems, plays, novels, paintings, as well as historical studies. Chapter 5 gives attention to many of these works. In 1942, historian James Malin published a long study of the Kansas (*John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six*) years that saw Brown in starkly negative terms. Peterson has a great deal of criticism for Malin’s work. Here he does provide helpful context, seeing Malin’s work as part of the Civil War revisionism prevalent in those years.

More recent views of Brown are the subject of chapter 6. Peterson sees the importance of Stephen Oates’s 1970 biography (*To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown*), which largely reversed the revisionist view. “Oates ... owed much to Villard,” Peterson argues, even though he disagreed with Villard on some key points (p. 156). Peterson also sees the continued importance of art as a way Americans have grappled with John Brown. Russell Banks’s novel *Cloudsplitter: A Novel*, published in 1998, is an important element in the recent renewal of interest in Brown. Peterson tells us in an “Author’s Note” that his own reading of Banks’s novel “opened to me a view of John Brown I had not had before and spurred me to learn more about his life and legend” (p. xi).

What he learned has been turned into a useful and gracefully written book for anyone interested in Brown or how historical legends develop. Read in conjunction with other recent works on Brown, this book prepares us to ponder some of the most important historical and moral issues in American history.

Note

[1]. Franny Nudelman, *John Brown’s Body: Slavery, Violence, and the Culture of War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 39.

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