



Peggy A. Russo, Paul Finkelman, eds. *Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. xxx + 228 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1630-3.

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The Meteor of the War

“John Brown did not use argument,” wrote W. E. B. DuBois in 1909, “he was himself an argument.”[1] The argument DuBois referred to in his classic Brown biography was not simply the moral case against slavery. John Brown stood for that, of course, but he also embodied something far more controversial: the idea that only violence could destroy slavery, and that true abolitionism thus entailed direct, even bloody, action against slaveholders. Brown’s lived argument has challenged, inspired, vexed, and divided Americans since the 1850s. Nathaniel Hawthorne thought him a “blood-stained fanatic,” Henry David Thoreau called him “the bravest and humanest man in all the country,” while Herman Melville poetically summoned the specter of “(Weird John Brown)/The meteor of the war.”[2] Among students of American history, the disputes have been no less fierce, setting critics like Robert Penn Warren and C. Van Woodward against DuBois and a slew of recent defenders. So it is no surprise that this collection of essays on John Brown’s legacy, edited by Peggy A. Russo and Paul Finkelman, is rife with disagreement and contradiction. Indeed, as Russo’s preface argues, it is perhaps more enlightening to present “Thirteen Ways of Looking at John Brown” than just one (p. xix).

The collection is the product of an interdisciplinary 1996 conference on John Brown, held at Penn State’s Mount Alto campus. In each of the 13 short essays, the emphasis is not on John Brown the man, or even John Brown the historical actor, but rather a more elusive idea of Brown’s “legacy.” The backgrounds of the contributors range from history and political science to criminal justice and psychology. Such radical diversity provides the book’s most compelling interest, but the brevity of the essays, their oblique and uneven focus on Brown, and the uncertain coherence of the whole often leave the reader wishing for less “legacy” and more John Brown.

Probably the two most provocative and memorable essays in *Terrible Swift Sword* come from the scholars

working farthest afield from history. Kenneth R. Carroll, a practicing clinical psychologist in Pennsylvania, uses a variety of remote psychological tests to “diagnose” Brown with bipolar disorder. For Carroll, Brown’s family history of mental illness, his checkered personal life and business career, and the primary-source testimony of friends and neighbors exhibit a “remarkable consistency” that forms “a coherent picture” (p. 125). Brown’s grandiosity, mania, and “relentless drive toward self-aggrandizement” fit modern psychology’s standard diagnostic criteria for bipolar disorder (p. 128). Carroll argues that the diagnosis is clinched by his study, in which three John Brown experts completed “an objective psychological test, as if responding on behalf of John Brown.” The composite results yield a computer-generated “Interpretive Report” that suggests that “the possibility of a Bipolar Affective Disorder” should be evaluated (pp. 132-134).

Carroll’s diagnosis is hardly conclusive, of course, but he, along with Russo and Finkelman, are to be commended for their creative approach to the question of Brown’s mental state. His essay, at the very least, should provide the basis for a larger argument about the possibility of Brown being bipolar—a debate that can and should be joined by historians and psychologists alike.

Also likely to provoke controversy is criminal justice professor James N. Gilbert’s “behavioral analysis” of John Brown (p. 107). Five years ago, the historian David Blight asked if Brown can remain a hero “in an age of Timothy McVeigh, Usama Bin Laden, and the bombers of abortion clinics.”[3] Indeed, the specter of modern terrorism looms over many of the essays in *Terrible Swift Sword*, with Finkelman’s introduction explicitly denouncing the comparisons between Brown and twenty-first-century terrorists. Gilbert, however, argues that Brown’s actions in Bleeding Kansas and at Harpers Ferry meet the modern “definitional standard” of terrorism: “the unlawful use of threat of violence against persons or property to further

political or social objectives” (pp. 109-111).

The key word here, of course, is “unlawful”: Brown’s various raids, killings, and liberations all certainly violated the law of the antebellum United States. But so did, for that matter, Harriet Tubman’s work on the Underground Railroad. And what was David Walker’s *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*—the foundational document of immediatist abolitionism—if not an extended “threat of violence” against the property of slaveholders? Gilbert concludes, rather too glibly, that “the heroic legend of John Brown” ignores “the terrorist truth of his crimes” (p. 115). What he fails to explore properly are the competing moral and political claims of abolitionist “higher law,” the official law books of 1859, and larger ethical questions of violence and justice. A convincing argument that John Brown was a terrorist would require a fuller historical and philosophical discussion, not merely a criminologist’s “behavioral analysis.”

Several other essays in *Terrible Swift Sword* deserve mention. William Keeney offers a sensitive reading of John Brown poems in the year 1859, arguing that many abolitionist poets sought, vainly, to praise Brown while eliding the violence that was at the heart of Brown’s challenge to slavery. Only William Dean Howells, Keeney demonstrates, was bold enough to assert “a justification for violence in the service of liberation: ‘It shall not be a crime for deeds/To quicken liberating creeds’” (p. 158). Co-editor Russo follows John Brown to Hollywood, and provides a lively discussion of the two most popular film portraits of Brown, in *Santé Fe Trail* (1940) and *Seven Angry Men* (1955). She closes with a wish that “the PBS producers of *American Experience*” would “do justice to the old man and to his story” (p. 208). This reviewer is more interested in the upcoming Martin Scorsese-produced John Brown HBO project, which may do more to fix the image of Brown in the popular consciousness than any number of history books, novels, or PBS specials.

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The other historical essays in *Terrible Swift Sword* are often engaging, but suffer from their brevity—at ten to twenty pages each, some still read like conference papers. Dean Grodzins and Jean Libby explore Brown’s connections to the abolitionist Theodore Parker, and the black minister Thomas W. Henry, respectively, but they seem to be more interested in Parker and Henry than in Brown. The novelist Bruce Olds’s contribution is more a passionate defense of the truth claims of historical fiction than a commentary on anything relating to Brown or his legacy. On the whole, it must be said, *Terrible Swift Sword* is somewhat less satisfying for the historian than Finkelman’s earlier collection, *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid* (1995).

Nevertheless, this volume is a diverse and useful addition to scholarship on the man that Howells acknowledged was both “the felon of the hour” and the “hero of the noblest plan.” (pp. 158-159) Weird John Brown’s body molds still, but the debate over his legacy rages on.

Notes

[1]. W .E. B. DuBois, *John Brown*, ed. and introduced by David Roediger (New York: Random House, 2001 [1909]), 204.

[2]. Hawthorne quoted in Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (New York: Random House, 1961), 24; Thoreau quoted in C. Vann Woodward, “John Brown’s Private War,” in *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), 53-53; Herman Melville, “The Portent,” 1859, in *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century, Vol. 2: Herman Melville to Stickney; American Indian Poetry; Folk Songs and Spirituals* (New York: Library of America, 1993), 2.

[3]. David Blight, “John Brown: Triumphant Failure,” *The American Prospect*, November 30, 2002.