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**Steven Lubet**. *John Brown's Spy: The Adventurous Life and Tragic Confession of John E. Cook.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. x + 325 pp. $28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-18049-7.

**John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, eds**. *The Tribunal: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid.* Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012. iix + 570 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-04885-0.

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## Whither John Brown Historiography

Anyone interested in John Brown's life and legacy has not lacked books to read. Scholars have written a variety of useful books of late, including cradle-to-grave biographies by David Reynolds and Robert McGlone; John Stauffer's biography of Gerrit Smith, John Brown, James McCune Smith, and Frederick Douglass; Louis A. DeCaro's study of Brown's religious life; a narrative of the raid on Harpers Ferry and the aftermath by Tony Horowitz; Brian McGinty's exploration of John Brown's trial; and analyses of Brown and memory by Merrill Peterson and R. Blakeslee Gilpin.[1] Given this explosion of work on John Brown, new biographies or narratives of the raid can be put on hold and scholars should consider fresh directions in Brown historiography. Two of the latest entries in the literature, John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd's *The Tribunal* and Steven Lubet's *John Brown's Spy*, claim to do something new. Stauffer and Trodd assert that their book–a documentary reader–is the first "to distinguish between Northern and Southern responses to Brown's raid, and the first to gather the international responses" (p. xxi).[2] Lubet argues that his book is innovative because it focuses on John Brown's raiders instead of allowing them to be overwhelmed by Brown's personality. Both books demonstrate that, like the Lincoln theme, the John Brown theme has hardly been exhausted.

Stauffer and Trodd are no strangers to Brown and *The Tribunal* joins a growing group of John Brown readers.[3] *The Tribunal* is about twice as long as *Meteor of War* and the additional length permits the inclusion of a greater variety of documents. The book is divided into five sections. The first, "In His Own Words," focuses on Brown's writings. Readers familiar with Brown will not find many surprises in this section. Indeed, some may be disappointed that the section is so short. Stauffer and Trodd begin with Brown's 1848 essay "Sambo's Mistakes" (written for an African American newspaper, the *Ram's Horn*). None of Brown's letters before 1848 are included. For the sake of comparison, *Meteor of War* includes eleven letters written before 1848 and *John Brown: The Making of a Revolutionary* includes twenty-one.[4] The attention to Brown's letters seemed rather cursory and Stauffer and Trodd might have included, among others, Brown's 1834 letter to his brother Frederick in which Brown outlined his ideas for helping African Americans.

Such a claim, however, cannot be made of the second and third sections of the book. In the second section, "Northern Responses," Stauffer and Trodd include a variety of pro- and anti-Brown documents from black and white, as well as male and female, Northerners. Some of the documents, such as Lincoln's "Address at the Cooper Institute," for instance, are well known, but Stauffer and Trodd are to be commended for the range of documents in this section. Similarly, the third section, "Southern Responses," incorporates the sentiments of a variety of Southerners, not just the reflexive anger of Margaretta Mason, but the diverse attitudes of Southern unionists and fire-eaters, men and women, and black and white people. Too often people speak of "a" Southern response to John Brown, but Stauffer and Trodd deftly illustrate that monolithic language is impossible when speaking of Northern and Southern responses to Brown.

The fourth section, "International Responses," presents some of the reactions of foreign contemporaries to Brown. Stauffer and Trodd contend, correctly, that *The Tribunal* is the first book "to gather the international responses" (p. xxi). To their credit, Stauffer and Trodd assemble a rather wide range of documents and offer many examples beyond the well-known words of Victor Hugo

and Karl Marx. Still, there is a pronounced bias in favor of Europe. Roughly half the responses come from the British Isles; other countries represented include France, Poland, Prussia, and Italy. Although they include one Australian response; one from Canada, and a Haitian response, Stauffer and Trodd primarily include documents from Europe. There is nothing wrong with looking at European responses, and the tendency to globalize the study of the United States is a positive one.[5] On the other hand, the lack of Latin American voices, with the exception of the single Haitian document, is disappointing because Stauffer and Trodd make the compelling argument that "foreigners responded to Brown's raid far more sympathetically and consistently than did Americans" (p. xxi). Many Latin Americans, Joaquim Nabuco for instance, responded sympathetically to Brown or employed Brown's image in a variety of ways. The fact that large areas of the world are not adequately represented means readers are left with an incomplete picture. While Stauffer and Trodd offer a nice start, there is much work left to be done in analyzing international responses to Brown.

The fifth and final section, "Civil War and U.S. Postwar Responses," concludes by discussing responses from 1861 to 1889. Stauffer and Trodd chose to end in 1889 because, as they explain, in that year Brown became a marginalized figure embraced only by African Americans and radical white Northerners. It is standard procedure not to critique authors for the book they did not write, but Stauffer and Trodd's decision to stop in 1889 struck this reader as problematic. Responses to Brown after 1889 were multifaceted and deserved greater attention. Brown was consistently invoked by Eugene V. Debs; by African Americans during the civil rights movement; by opponents of abortion; and by domestic terrorists such as Timothy McVeigh. Stauffer and Trodd are not ignorant of these facts, and students and general readers would have benefited from inclusion of invocations of Brown in the period after 1889.

Perhaps the most serious problem in the book is Stauffer and Trodd's analysis of the impact of Brown's raid. Leading Southerners, Stauffer and Trodd assert, concluded that the only solution to Brown's raid was secession. The problem is that Stauffer and Trodd allow one group of Southerners to stand in for all white Southerners. The results from the election of 1860 provide a different story. John Bell and Stephen A. Douglas won many more votes in the South than John C. Breckinridge, which suggests that many Southerners were unconvinced by the arguments of the fire-eaters and swayed by the unionist rhetoric of Bell and Douglas.[6] Furthermore, Virginia, the very state where Brown's raid occurred, gave its electoral votes to Bell and did not secede until after the firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for troops! Stauffer and Trodd overstate Brown's influence on the secession crisis, understate the persistence of Southern unionism, and overlook the important work of Daniel W. Crofts.[7] Still, problems aside, *The Tribunal* succeeds in presenting a wide range of sources and will be of use both in classrooms and for a general audience.

Steven Lubet's *John Brown's Spy: The Adventurous Life and Tragic Confession of John E. Cook* presents an important new direction for future research. Lubet argues that historians have long neglected to analyze Brown's raiders and have treated Brown's men as "literal spear carriers" and ciphers (p. 9). Lubet is correct that scholars have generally allowed Brown's forceful personality to overwhelm his men. By seeking to restore the importance of John Cook, who was, for a time, the most infamous man in the United States next to Brown himself, Lubet sheds new light on Brown's raid and trial. Lubet highlights Cook's moral complexity in an attempt to shine new light on Brown. On the one hand, Cook seemed devoted to Brown and his militant brand of abolitionism. On the other, Cook not only confessed, but implicated his fellow raiders. What drew such a man to Brown and what made Brown trust him, despite such vast differences in temperament and background?

Lubet begins not with the raid, but with Cook's pleasant childhood and his involvement with Brown and the Free State cause in Kansas. Lubet argues that Cook fought against proslavery forces and distinguished himself for bravery, but tended toward recklessness. Cook became very close with Brown and accompanied him to Chatham in 1858, but did not participate in the rescue of eleven slaves from Missouri because Brown had given Cook a special assignment: to go to Harpers Ferry and "spy on the locals in preparation for the coming raid" (p. 37). Lubet accurately observes that Brown's choice of Cook was baffling. A flamboyant, talkative, impetuous womanizer, who seemed congenitally unable to keep a secret, Cook was not suited to such a mission. Furthermore, not only was he radically different from Brown, which leads one to wonder why Cook was given such an important role, but Brown apparently suffered severe misgivings about Cook. Unfortunately, Lubet never really provides a definitive answer as to why Brown chose Cook.

Cook's time in Harpers Ferry is usually glossed over in most treatments of the raid. However, certain features of the raid begin to make more sense when one

accounts for Cook's participation., for instance, the taking of Lewis Washington and the other hostages. Most scholars overlook an obvious question: how did the men assigned to secure the hostages, men who had spent the past few months hiding at the Kennedy farm, know how to get to Lewis Washington's plantation in the dead of the night, in unfamiliar territory, and find their way back to Harpers Ferry? The answer, of course, was that Cook had mapped out the way for them and had scouted the route to Washington's plantation before the raid. Additionally, Cook provided Brown with inaccurate information. Cook erroneously assured Brown that some Maryland politicians would join the raid. In addition, Cook's overly optimistic analysis of how many slaves would join the raid influenced Brown's own ideas. One suspects Lubet accords Cook too much importance in shaping Brown's ideas. Cook's reports may have helped shape Brown's beliefs, but Brown primarily based his notions of slave militancy on his interactions with freed slaves and his studies of maroon colonies.[8]

Lubet also asserts that Cook was a poor choice for this assignment because his behavior in Harpers Ferry should have aroused suspicions but somehow did not. Cook always armed himself heavily and "spoke freely of his days as a free-state fighter in Kansas" (p. 42). Moreover, notwithstanding his abolitionist attitudes, Cook made a favorable impression. Here is a compelling point that needs to be grappled with in greater depth. This was, after all, an era when the South was notoriously intolerant of abolitionism and abolitionists, suspicious of outsiders, militantly crushed dissent, and often ran dissenters out of town. But the heavily armed Cook, who made no secret of his abolitionism and his time in Kansas, somehow attracted no suspicion and formed close relationships with many of the residents of Harpers Ferry.

Lubet's story increases in tempo after the failure of the raid. While Brown lay wounded on the floor of the engine house, Cook, Owen Brown, Charles Tidd, Barclay Coppoc, and Francis Merriam faced the unenviable task of escaping. One of the important points Lubet makes here is his assertion that "Cook was one of the two most famous militants in the country second only to John Brown himself" (p. 77). This is not a point many students of Brown and his raid, let alone general readers, would know; hence it is one of the ways Lubet contributes to the ever-evolving literature. Interestingly, Lubet demonstrates just how much of this story is one of chance, luck, and how Cook often seemed to be fortune's fool. When he was captured outside of Chambersburg, Cook bargained with his captors, who were agreeable to allowing him to ransom his life and took him to Alexander K. McClure, a prominent Republican lawyer in Chambersburg. McClure, however, happened to be out of the office. By the time he came back, Cook was already before a justice of the peace. Although McClure discouraged his wife from trying to rescue Cook, McClure negotiated with the jailer to allow Cook to escape in a few days, believing that Virginia could not send an extradition request so soon. By a trick of fate, Cook was taken away the next day, because a Virginia requisition for extradition had been issued (for another of the raiders mistakenly thought to be Cook).

When discussing the trials of the raiders and the behind-the-scenes maneuvering, Lubet, a professor of law, is clearly at his strongest. One of the main themes of Cook's story is betrayal. When he was captured, Cook began to talk and he provided, over the next few weeks, additional information that helped Virginia authorities pursue raiders still at large. Lubet offers extended analysis of all the trials, not just Cook's, and observes that in his final speech to the court, Brown rebuked those conspirators (i.e., Cook) who were cooperating with the prosecution, a point that rarely makes it into accounts of the trial. In addition, Cook's situation was fundamentally different from the other raiders. Since one of Cook's brothers-in-law was Ashbel Willard, the governor of Indiana, Cook could call on powerful allies, although Lubet remains uncertain whether Willard did Cook any favors. Certainly Willard helped Cook by requesting Daniel Voorhees to serve as Cook's attorney. However, Willard and Voorhees pressured Cook to confess, judging that this was the only way to save his life. Voorhees and Willard believed that Governor Henry Wise and Andrew Hunter would spare Cook's life in exchange for his confession, but Wise rescinded the deal. Therefore, despite the tremendous effort of Voorhees and Willard, Cook was convicted and sentenced to be hanged. Cook and Edwin Coppoc, his cellmate, attempted to escape but their plan was foiled. Cook not only lost his final chance to gain his freedom but was, for the last time, the victim of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Cook, Edwin Coppoc, Shields Green, and John Copeland were hanged on December 16, 1859.

The story did not end there. Lubet concludes with a discussion of Cook and memory. Lubet demonstrates how Cook's notoriety waned after his death and how "most abolitionists saw little to be gained by vilifying Cook, and some saw good reasons to forgive him" (p. 251). To a large extent, Cook, like the other raiders, was both overshadowed by Brown and a victim of early Brown biographers James Redpath and Richard Hinton, who created a sanitized version of Cook. Lubet force-

fully argues in favor of studying the raiders to learn more about the men who joined Brown and to move beyond sanitized depictions. Overall, this is a well-written book that will appeal to both a scholarly and popular audience, although, like Stauffer and Trodd, Lubet errs in placing too much responsibility for the "death" of Southern unionism on John Brown.

*John Brown's Spy* and *The Tribunal* provide two new and productive directions in John Brown historiography. Furthermore, these books demonstrate that there are many additional lines of inquiry and other unexplored aspects of Brown's life and legend to consider.

Notes

[1]. See David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005); Robert E. McGlone, *John Brown's War Against Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Louis A. DeCaro Jr., *Fire From the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Tony Horowitz, *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011); Brian McGinty, *John Brown's Trial* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Merrill Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2002); and R. Blakeslee Gilpin, *John Brown Still Lives! America's Long Reckoning with Violence, Equality, and Change* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

[2]. Certainly *The Tribunal* is the first John Brown reader to accomplish both points, although *Meteor of War*, Stauffer and Trodd's first John Brown reader, also separated Northern and Southern responses. Zoe Trodd and John Stauffer, eds., *Meteor of War: The John Brown Story* (Maplecrest, NY: Brandywine Press, 2004).

[3]. Louis Ruchames, ed., *A John Brown Reader* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1959); Louis Ruchames, ed., *John Brown: The Making of a Revolutionary* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969); Richard Warch and Jonathan F. Fanton, eds., *John Brown* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973); Trodd and Stauffer, eds., *Meteor of War;* and Jonathan Earle, *John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008).

[4]. See Trodd and Stauffer, *Meteor of War*, 35-55; and Ruchames, *John Brown*, 43-68.

[5]. With the conspicuous exception of Seymour Drescher "Servile Insurrection and John Brown's Body in Europe," in *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid*, ed. Paul Finkleman (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1995), very little attention has been devoted to international responses to and uses of John Brown. This is certainly an area that needs additional work.

[6]. Breckinridge received 570,871 votes; Bell obtained 515,973; Douglas won 163,525; and Lincoln got 26,430 votes. These calculations were derived from the numbers provided in Edward McPherson, *The Political History of the United States During the Great Rebellion* (Washington DC.: Philp & Solomons, 1864), 1.

[7]. Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Stauffer and Trodd do not engage Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977) or Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Politics and Power in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), both of which contend that secession was a planter coup; or J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), which argues that secession was a popular movement.

[8]. For Cook's impact on Brown see Reynolds, *John Brown*, 305 and McGlone, *John Brown's War on Slavery*, 151. For another perspective see Matthew J. Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

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