

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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## The Ubiquitous John Brown and the Organized Past

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History is a peculiar creature. Events happen. Some sort of record remains and writers—some might be professional historians—move in and examine the evidence for issues, motives, facts, and significance, as they prepare their narrative and analysis for the reader. Chronology and context are important. When did it happen and what did it mean are questions often asked of the past. The answers often form schools of interpretation and argument. Motives of the historical personage are important, as well as those of the re-creators of that event/personage who organize their narratives to make sense of the past event.

Merrill Peterson's insightful book on John Brown sparked these musings about the nature of history and the importance of reputation and image. "Characteristically among historical actors, fame is an accretion, something built over time. With John Brown it came like thunder all at once" (p. 171). Peterson, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Virginia, has done it again. As with his books on the historical reputations of Jefferson and Lincoln, he has taken a complex topic, an event and the remembrance of it, and provided a brilliant narrative and analysis of a man whose life was defined by his attack at Harpers Ferry, soon followed by his trial and execution. Otherwise, as Peterson recognizes, Brown would have passed from this world with no notice.

Provoked, in the good sense of the word, by a "causal reading of Russell Banks's historical novel *Cloudsplitter*," Peterson notes that he wanted to know more about Brown. The result is this first-rate book, "an extended meditation on the life of John Brown and his place in American thought and imagination from his death in 1859 to the near-present."

Immediately upon his death, the legend emerged and the "body" of John Brown began marching everywhere

and appearing in all kinds of literary types and artistic forms. Rare is the writer or artist who does not have some sort of agenda in dealing with Brown's life and legacies. With the art of the master historian Peterson, in six well-organized chapters packed with information and insight, uncovers the fascinating story of a man who was more significant dead than alive. The reason is clear. The issues are not just about Brown himself but his relationship to the coming of the Civil War, the role or function of violence in American politics, the role of religion and mental health in motivation, and a host of others.

In Peterson's chapters, the narrative flows easily between a discussion of the events of Brown's life and the dramatization of the events in prose, poetry, and the visual arts. Chapter 1, "The John Brown Epoch," covers the attack at Harpers Ferry and Brown's execution with a flashback dealing with his biography. The next chapter, "Faces and Places of the Hero," deals with the song "John Brown's Body" and other early artistic and political references to Brown's life and deeds. Chapter 3, "The Kansas Imbroglia," focuses on Brown's activities in the Sunflower State where his fame was born and where also his legacy of direct action and motives were questioned. A war of literary words was underway that remains a part of the Brown mystique. In a certain way the American Civil War had already begun in Kansas as charges of murder and violent attack were rather commonplace between free state and slave state forces. Moral justification, then and now, busied many contemporaries and historians. Chapter 4, "The Great Biography," deals with Oswald Garrison Villard's *John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (1910) and the scholarly and popular fallout from it. Brown was an icon for the abolitionists and the later civil rights movement, in particular the NAACP. Peterson deftly explores how the Villard work influenced the scholarship of later historians such as James C. Malin and Stephen B. Oates. Chapter 5, "Kaleidoscope," among its other virtues, explores

how visual art and historical sites have contributed to the memory of John Brown as a martyr. And, as Peterson makes clear in his final chapter, "John Brown Redivivus," historians have a difficult time defining the boundaries of martyrdom as demonstrated by later biographies of Brown.

In a well-written two-page "Coda," Peterson brings his exploration of history, the thematic past, memory, and popular culture to a close. New perspectives are always being added to the record. The legend "remains malleable, still open to contingency and challenge. The course of his reputation has fluctuated, and while it seems

clear that Brown will never again knock at the door of the American pantheon, he still answers to some of the most enduring moral quandaries and dilemmas of our national life, and these resonate through the image" (p. 172).

Ironically, Brown's reputation as revolutionary icon will lessen as a strong consensus over the causes of the Civil War—slavery—emerges. As witnessed by Peterson's fine scholarship, indications are, however, that John Brown in some form or other will continue to be present in the nooks and crannies of collective memory and the organized past.

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