

**Louis A. DeCaro, Jr.**, *“Fire from the Midst of You”: A Religious Life of John Brown*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2002. xiii + 348 pp. \$32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-1921-3.

**Gregory Toledo**, *The Hanging of Old Brown: A Story of Slaves, Statesmen, and Redemption*. Westport and London: Praeger, 2002. xiv + 276 pp. \$64.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-275-97479-4.



**Reviewed by** Glenna Schroeder-Lein

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John Brown, the controversial nineteenth-century anti-slavery activist, has been the subject of many previous studies. The two books reviewed here present a contrast in treatment and style.

Gregory Toledo's book, *The Hanging of Old Brown*, begins with a chapter summarizing the slave experience, followed by one tracing the development of the slavery system in the United States, including attitudes toward and rebellions against it. The rest of the book recounts Brown's life, with a section devoted to his pre-Kansas years, another to his Kansas experiences, and, of course, a final one to his Harper's Ferry expedition and its aftermath. This is essentially a narrative of Brown's life with little serious historical

analysis. Toledo has based his book on a variety of sources, including collections of Brown's letters, memoirs of relatives and acquaintances (some written considerably after the fact), contemporary newspapers, a number of biographies of Brown written over more than a century, and quite a few studies of North American slavery.

While Toledo's sources and general content are reasonable, his style is the source of many problems. From the preface to the epilogue, Toledo writes in a melodramatic style, full of what can only be called "purple" prose and mixed metaphors. For example, in a discussion of the Compromise of 1850, Toledo writes, "[Henry] Clay, now a senator in his seventies, was summoned to put his learned finger in the dike of secession and

civil war" (p. 41). From the perspective of the radical abolitionists "the Garrisonians' refusal to encourage slaves to fight against their oppressors smelled like a lukewarm broth in a southern kettle" (p. 59). Finally, the slave rebel "Nat [Turner] was the bogymen who came out in a rage from the basement of southern consciousness" (p. 14). These effusions would merely be laughable if such comments did not appear on virtually every page.

There are plenty of actual errors, such as: President William Henry Harrison died on March 4, 1841 (p. 38); the Missouri Compromise line was called the Mason-Dixon line (pp. 32, 45); and John Brown grabbed stirrups to drive a wagon (p. 174). In addition, the author's florid style and attempts to be cute in phraseology lead to trivialization and oversimplification of events, such as the Christiana riot (p. 43). Sometimes the simplification and cuteness lead to statements which are potentially incorrect. For example, "Within months the good congressman [Joshua Giddings] would be inserting his well-polished shoes into his well-dentured mouth" (p. 106). If Toledo had written that Giddings put his foot in his mouth, the reader could accept that and agree. But the phraseology used leads to questions: how does Toledo know Giddings's shoes were "well-polished"? How does he know about Giddings's dental health? None of the sources cited in the footnote are likely to contain biographical information about Giddings.

As a result of these stylistic flaws, the reader not only tires of the book long before its conclusion, but also tends not to trust the author's opinions. Toledo believes that Brown's actions at Harper's Ferry and in jail can be explained as a result of his strong opposition to slavery and his hyper-Calvinist religious views. This is a reasonable conclusion, but by this time it is difficult to pay attention to Toledo's perspective. Unfortunately, because of Toledo's distracting use of language and limited historical analysis, this book makes no

positive contribution to the field of John Brown studies.

Louis A. DeCaro Jr., in his book *"Fire from the Midst of You": A Religious Life of John Brown*, would agree with Toledo that John Brown's attitudes toward slavery and religion provoked his activities in Kansas and Virginia. But rather than simply telling the story of Brown's life, DeCaro analyzes how Brown's beliefs motivated his actions. DeCaro wants to examine Brown's own religious perspective, not the viewpoints and interpretations of others, who generally conclude that Brown was a religious fanatic.

DeCaro begins the book with a good, brief overview of the issues and theories pertaining to slavery, treating conflicting opinions about the institution in a fair and realistic manner. Chapter 2 is devoted to a discussion of the life, attitudes, and strong Calvinism of Owen Brown, John's father. This perspective on the formative influences on John Brown is extremely helpful. The rest of the book (except chapter 17, which is an overview of the situation in Kansas in the 1850s) is devoted to Brown's life, arranged in a chronological manner. While Toledo and DeCaro deal with many of the same incidents, their treatment is totally different. DeCaro's biography of Brown is well thought-out and well-written. He makes much use of Brown's own correspondence, as well as that of other family members and some later recollections. DeCaro does not hesitate to point out when perspectives might be biased or altered in self-defense as, for example, in the interaction of Frederick Douglass and John Brown.

DeCaro presents John Brown as a complex person. Brown was self-confident and extremely opinionated, refusing the advice of others on most occasions. He was a strong Calvinist, but most other Calvinists were racists. However, most abolitionists were Unitarians with a very liberal theological perspective uncongenial to Brown. Consequently, as he became more active in the anti-slavery movement, Brown tended toward family

worship services and fellowship with compatible Christian individuals, even occasionally starting his own church. Brown believed in and practiced absolute equality for black people. He often went out of his way to help them establish farms or escape by the Underground Railroad, as the case required.

While DeCaro is sympathetic to Brown, he is realistic about Brown's strengths and weaknesses. Brown had a sort of personal magnetism that commanded respect, but his stubbornness often alienated people. Brown was scrupulously honest but in general a very poor businessman. He had certain outstanding skills such as tanning hides, raising sheep and cattle, and judging the quality of wool. But he was poor at land speculation, organizing "wool growers," or negotiating with manufacturers who purchased wool, all of which got him into serious financial difficulties.

Although the book is titled as a study of John Brown's religious life, that religion is integrated into a full biography as part of a complete whole. Brown's religious beliefs are presented as a consistent part of his personality, actions, and character, and a logical reason for why he would ultimately take extreme actions to free the slaves. DeCaro endeavors especially to present the Kansas situation in such a way that Brown's instigation of the Pottawattomie Massacre can be explained. He suggests asking the question, "What kind of circumstances would drive exceptionally moral and religious people like the Browns to such desperate measures" (p. 236)?

Unlike most books on Brown, DeCaro's spends only a few pages on the Harper's Ferry raid of October 1859 and does not attempt to describe it in any detailed way. Because the raid has been presented many times before, this is not a problem, but readers should be aware that this is a book focused on the cause, not the raid itself.

DeCaro has written an excellent, well-rounded biographical study of John Brown, which is highly recommended.

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