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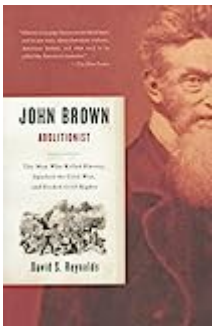

David S. Reynolds. *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights.* New York: Vintage Books, 2006. x + 578 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-41188-5; $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-375-72615-6.

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Verry Much Bloodshed

John Brown's prophetic last words from the gallows, foretelling that the crime of American slavery would "never be purged away; but with Blood," and, in fact, with "*verry much* bloodshed," resonate throughout David S. Reynolds's new "*cultural* biography" (p. 9) of the controversial American abolitionist. Despite its overreaching subtitle, *John Brown Abolitionist* is less an exploration of the causes of the Civil War, than a sustained inquiry into the sources, ethics, and consequences of Brown's abolitionist violence. Reynolds has written a morally serious study of political terrorism that both sheds light on a critical incident in American history and speaks to contemporary events.

Reynolds, Distinguished Professor of English and American Studies at the City University of New York, situates *John Brown Abolitionist* within a context of earlier biographies of the antislavery fighter. Reynolds periodizes the literature in two phases. Early biographers painted Brown in Manichean terms as either a godlike hero or a murderous villain; later biographers achieved strict "impartiality" by finessing vital questions such as whether Brown was sane and whether his actions were justified. Reynolds wishes to correct the latter oversights without embracing the former partisanship, arguing that "one can be objective without remaining impartial about the crucial moral, political, and human issues that Brown's life poses" (p. 8). Reynolds largely achieves this (in my opinion) estimable goal, by arguing that Brown was a flawed hero whose use of violence against slavery was reasoned and strategic, if at times criminal. *John Brown Abolitionist* should also be situated within a contemporary historiographical trend towards the reconsideration of non-Garrisonian reform. Frederick Blue, Jonathan Earle, and Bruce Laurie, each have recently published books positively reappraising political abolitionism.[1] There also has been new attention to the less familiar history of violent antislavery; see Stanley Harrold's recent monograph on aggressive abolitionism in the 1840s, as well as his edited collection with John R. McKivigan.[2] Slave revolts, and especially the Haitian Revolution, are presently generating more new monographs than almost any other subject in the history of slavery.

Reynolds does not directly address the historiogra-

phy of antislavery, but he does situate Brown within a historical context. It is this attention to historical milieu that causes Reynolds to define his study as a "cultural biography." Overall the book is thoroughly researched and well written. (Although the alliterative chapter-titling is a little goofy–each of the eighteenth chapters is titled with a "P" word: "The Party," "The Puritan," "The Pioneer," etc.). Reynolds turns to historical context to uncover the sources of Brown's decision to use violence against slaveholders. However, historians may not be thoroughly persuaded by Reynolds's causation. He places a lot of emphasis on Brown's "Puritan" Calvinist beliefs: "He was a terrorist *because of* his own interpretation of Puritan beliefs" (p. 19). Reynolds connects Brown's use of violence to the warrior-model set by Oliver Cromwell. This begs the question of why other Calvinist antislavery men, from Samuel Sewall through Samuel Hopkins to Wendell Phillips, chose non-violent means to oppose slavery.

Reynolds also attributes a great deal to Brown's supposed total lack of racial prejudice. Here Reynolds extracts Brown from the historical context, arguing for his subject's difference from other antislavery leaders–even the saintly Garrison. "Why did John Brown embrace the same insurrectionary violence that drove other Abolitionists to pacifism?" Reynolds asks. The answer: "He did so because he was thoroughly open to all aspects of the lack experience, including the violence of slave rebels" (p. 56). Reynolds argues that because Brown recognized and respected black agency, he embraced an antislavery strategy that drew on the slaves' own power, thus earning himself the love of African Americans at the time and ever since. According to Reynolds, it was other abolitionists' "patronizing attitude toward blacks" (p.102) that held them back from using violence, whereas Brown's racial egalitarianism enabled him to pick up the sword and strike the blow that "killed" slavery. It seems worth asking whether racism alone explains why other white abolitionists did not embrace slave rebellion. Is it possible that slaves and many of their supporters recognized that slave rebellions in the United States had historically resulted in the massacre of the rebels rather than the crippling of the slave system? Did Brown's faith in the power of slave rebellion reflect his racial egalitarianism, or was it a willful blindness?

In addition, before the interracial and racially egalitarian raid on Harper's Ferry, Brown led his sons and a band of white followers on a career of bloodshed in Kansas that seems less explicable as a manifestation of faith in slave agency. Brown's actions in Kansas included battles with proslavery militias at Osawatomie and Black Jack, as well as the liberation of slaves. More infamously, Brown led his sons and a band of followers on a nighttime raid to murder the men of a neighboring family of proslavery settlers at Pottawatomie. Brown directed his sons to force the men from their houses and hack them to death with double-edged swords–a weapon that Brown chose for its primitive brutality. The swords mutilated his victims "in a way that insurrectionary slaves or embittered Indians would have done it" (p. 167). Yet, Reynolds does not argue that Brown's violence at Pottawatomie indicated some sort of crazed bloodlust. Reynolds carefully situates the Pottawatomie raid in the context of "Bleeding Kansas" (the war between proslavery and free-state settlers for control of the nascent state). His account emphasizes the proslavery settlers' violent repression of the free-staters, and describes Brown's counterattack as long overdue. Brown's victims, the Doyles, are painted as an unsympathetic set of violent racists. Brown carefully selected targets who were agents of proslavery violence and participants in the guerilla war. The killings, Reynolds argues, were political crimes, not crimes of passion. Does that justify the murders? Reynolds poses the question, and seems to answer that the killings were "not admirable" or "legally defensible," but they were "explainable" (p. 139). Reynolds argues that the murders at Pottawatomie reveal Brown not as a lunatic or a villain, but rather as a rational actor who believed so strongly in the cause of antislavery that he was willing to kill for it.

The raid on Harper's Ferry Reynolds likewise depicts as a rational "discriminating blow at *Slavery*," (p. 303) rather than fanatical, delusional, or villainous, as it has often been described. The raid's immediate failure can be attributed to a series of tactical mistakes; but, Reynolds insists, Brown succeeded in his ultimate goal, terrorizing white Southerners and forcing a war that would end slavery. The book argues that the polarized reaction to the raid caused the election of Lincoln and the consequent decision by Southern states to secede. Although Reynolds's well-researched survey of the reactions to Brown's raid is fascinating, the causal argument again will trouble historians. Reynolds tries to demonstrate through counterfactual suppositions how the absence of John Brown would have resulted in the election of Stephen Douglas in 1860, and the continuation of slavery until "in all probability, an even more catastrophic war occurred later on" (p. 443). I quite enjoyed this counterfactual, but I know mine is a minority taste.

Reynolds concludes with a positive evaluation of Brown as an "*American* terrorist" who fought for the

American ideal of equal rights (p. 503). Slavery "was a state of war" between slaves and masters (p. 104), in Brown's words, and therefore slaves and their supporters were justified in using violence to oppose the institution. Reynolds's ultimate endorsement of Brown's violent methods is most striking in his fervent declaration at the book's conclusion that "there must be modern Americans who identify with the oppressed with such passion that they are willing to die for them" (p. 505). This positive judgment draws on the implicit assumption that violence is a rational tool that can be strategically employed to accomplish defined aims. But did violence truly accomplish Brown's goals? Hannah Arendt famously argued in "Reflections on Violence" that "violence can always destroy power" but it can never create power.[3] Violence did ultimately destroy the slave system, but did it create the racial egalitarianism that Brown desired? The window of black power following the war's end proved tragically brief. In the century following the Civil War, violence remained a tool for the repression of African Americans, not a rational means for them to gain power. When blacks tried to use force to protect their rights, as in Tulsa in 1921, it ended in their massacre, not the defeat of the racist system. Before we send off more generations of American youth to die for the cause (whatever the cause), it may be worth reading more history to understand what creates political power–not only what destroys it.

Notes

[1]. Frederick J. Blue, *No Taint of Compromise: Crusaders in Antislavery Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Jonathan Halperin Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Bruce Laurie, *Beyond Garrison: Antislavery and Social Reform* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[2]. Stanley Harrold, *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004); and John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold, *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999).

[3]. Hannah Arendt, "A Special Supplement: Reflections on Violence," *The New York Review of Books* 12, no.4 (February 27, 1969).