

*Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown.* Edited by Peggy A. Russo and Paul Finkelman. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005. 228 pp. Paper, \$24.95. ISBN: 0821416316.)

This collection of twelve essays by scholars from various fields examines the legacy of John Brown, the abolitionist zealot whose raid in 1859 on the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, further inflamed sectional hostility and helped ignite the Civil War. Drawn from a symposium on Brown at the Mont Alto campus of Pennsylvania State University in 1996, these essays focus for the most part on how people then and now have thought of Brown and how they have portrayed him—as a martyr, madman, criminal, or terrorist. The conference organizers and the editors sought multidisciplinary contributors in hopes of overcoming the “habit of specialization” among academics in an effort to garner fresh insights into Brown's legacy. These essays, for the most part, succeed in their goal.

The collection is organized into five sections. The first section includes essays that look at Brown's contemporaries and supporters, examining individuals such as Theodore Parker, the abolitionist clergyman who supported Brown as part of his own disillusionment with conservative Boston, and African-Americans in Virginia who also rallied to Brown at Harpers Ferry in far greater numbers than admitted by most historians. The fourth and fifth sections interrogate the representations of Brown in literature, film, and historical building preservation. They include thought-provoking essays from a variety of disciplines. Paul A. Shackel traces the vicissitudes of John Brown's Fort—the firehouse where Brown made his stand in Harpers Ferry that became a symbol for abolitionists and African-Americans. Peggy A. Russo deconstructs depictions of Brown in the films *Santa Fe Trail* and *Seven Angry Men*. William Keeney analyzes poetic descriptions of Brown. In an essay that seems somewhat dated in its post-modernist theorizing, Bruce Olds, author of the Pulitzer Prize-nominated novel based on Brown—*Raising Holy Hell*—defends historical fiction as a legitimate alternative to traditional history. All provide insight into the construction of historical memory and meaning about Brown and his war on slavery.

The second and third sections of the book, however, are the heart of the collection. The essays found here illustrate the advantages of a multidisciplinary approach and will probably interest readers most since they often provide conflicting answers to the question of how we should view Brown. Political philosopher John Scott Hammond, assessing the political content of Brown's rhetoric and actions, sees him as a Rousseauian founder of the American progressive tradition of civil rights and equality—a predecessor of Abraham Lincoln the emancipator and Martin Luther King, Jr.—who legitimately resorted violence to make a revolution. Eyal Naveh, a historian of political martyrdom at Tel Aviv University in Israel, points out that the “redemptive significance” of the Civil War helped fix Brown as an individual, social, and cosmic martyr for subsequent reformers from the left and the right. For white southerners in post-bellum America, writes intellectual historian Charles J. Holden, Brown remained a “murderous, lawless, Yankee zealot” (101). Holden demonstrates that post-bellum southern elites' depictions of Brown as a criminal madman who stirred up otherwise loyal, obedient, and docile slaves illuminated their own anti-democratic conservatism and their desire to maintain control of southern society.

Criminologist James N. Gilbert, in contrast to the foregoing, states that Brown clearly employed terror tactics and possessed a psychopathic personality consistent with those found in terrorists. Quoting the FBI, Gilbert defines terrorism in strictly contemporary terms from the

perspective of state authority: terrorism is “the unlawful use of violence” to “further political or social objectives” (109). “Unlawful” is the key word in Gilbert's definition. States define legal and illegal behavior, and protect the former and punish the latter. Brown believed that the daily terrorism of plantation slavery—what was slavery if not the use of violence to instill fear in order to achieve the planters' objectives—could not be overcome but through violence, a belief seemingly validated by federal support of often illegal actions taken to bolster slavery (e.g., presidential support for pro-slavery forces in Bleeding Kansas). While appeals to the transcendent—God, and Natural Law, for example—have been used to justify horrors, Gilbert's perfunctory dismissal of Brown's justifications for his actions denies historical context and robs of its sting his criticism that historians sympathetic to Brown have failed to label him a terrorist. Going beyond Brown, the author also mentions other “terrorists” who believed that entrenched state power justified violence to further their causes. Interestingly, he mentions mostly labor and radical groups, such as the Molly McGuires and the Weathermen of the 1960s, yet fails to cite the most widespread, successful, and clearly terrorist like group in American history: the first Ku Klux Klan, which arose in response to the success of Brown's struggle—the end of slavery. Despite these shortcomings, Gilbert's essay underscores the point that who one considers a terrorist depends upon how one defines terrorism. Gilbert's psychological profile of Brown as a psychopath also seems somewhat simplistic and legalistic since it is based solely on a few violent actions without any historical contextualization.

Kenneth R. Carroll offers a more sophisticated analysis of Brown's mental state in his essay, which most Ohio readers will find of particular interest for its references to Brown's family in the Buckeye State. After carefully analyzing Brown's writings and the affidavits of Ohio witnesses who knew the Brown family, Carroll concludes that Brown suffered from bipolar disorder, which made him susceptible to obsessions, and manic and irrational behavior. Carroll also asked three Brown scholars to answer a commonly used clinical diagnostic survey as they thought Brown would; the results strongly supported his conclusions. While not a “madman,” Brown's mental health may very well have shaped his response to the slavery. As Carroll notes, if Brown indeed suffered from mental illness, it probably led him to undertake a violent attack on slavery, and further explains the erratic, ill-planned nature of that attack. Carroll is careful to note, however, that Brown's mental health has nothing to do with his commitment to abolitionism and should not figure into any appraisal of the “righteousness of his purpose” (130).

Although this collection should not be the first for readers wishing to learn about Brown and his war on slavery, it does provide new insights into the man from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. It should serve well as a complement to traditional biographies of John Brown and is invaluable to readers who wish to look more closely at how the man and his legacy have fared in our collective memory.

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