

Chapter 14

John Brown at Harper's Ferry

Owen Brown was taught to believe that we are "all sinners in the hands of an angry God."⁶¹ When his father died, a neighbor sent a slave to help the family with the farming. Young Owen loved that slave but he too, died, and the young boy was again plunged into grief.



John Brown

John Brown, son of Owen, was also taught "to fear God and to keep his commandments;" to be kind to Negroes, and to "oppose their enslavement as a sin against God."⁶² While a young boy, he witnessed the beating of a Negro and became a determined foe of slavery.

Brown's life was a series of failures and disappointments. His first wife became mentally ill. She and nine of his children died. Though driven by a fierce desire to succeed, Brown faced a series of business failures. His tannery lost money, and he was finally forced to close it. He made some speculative land investments, owed thousands of dollars, and ended up bankrupt. Later he lost \$40,000 in an unsuccessful venture in the wool business. Continually hounded by creditors, he never repaid the money he owed as he fled from his native Connecticut to Ohio, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and finally to New York.

As Brown continued to fail in the practical world, he became increasingly drawn toward the issue of slavery and Negro rights. He tried to start a school for African-Americans in 1833, but was unable to raise the money. When the Fugitive Slave Law was passed in 1850, Brown attempted to arouse Northern Negroes to use force to resist slave catchers. His words of advice, delivered in 1851, are especially interesting for they reveal a direction that his own career was to take in later years:

*The trial for life of one bold and somewhat successful man, for defending his rights in good earnest, would arouse more sympathy throughout the nation than the suffering of all the slaves.*⁶³

John Brown in Kansas

The opening of Kansas to popular sovereignty aroused John Brown to direct action against slavery. In 1855, he joined his sons and hundreds of other abolitionists who settled in Kansas, determined to make it a free state and to do battle against despotism. The fraudulent election that fall, in which hundreds of Missouri residents voted for a pro slave government in the Kansas territory, infuriated Brown. One night in May 1856, Brown, several of his sons, and a small band of followers, dragged five pro-slave settlers from their cabins, and brutally murdered them. Although Brown himself did not have a hand in the actual executions he had exhorted his followers to murder, saying it was better that a score of bad men should die than that one man who came there to make Kansas a Free State should be driven out. These killings, known as the Pottawatomie Creek Massacre, were intended to avenge the deaths of six free state people. Incidents like this as well as the sack of Lawrence, led both sides of the dispute in Kansas to arm

⁶¹Quoted in Stephen B. Oaks, *To Purge this Land with Blood*, Harper and Row Publishers, New York. p. 4.

⁶² Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 4 & 8.

⁶³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 75

themselves and wage bloody war against each other. In subsequent months, Brown and his band rode through Kansas, combating pro-slave settlers and legal authorities.

As order was gradually restored to Kansas, Brown traveled east to Boston where he met with prominent abolitionists. Here in the living rooms of genteel opponents of slavery, Brown gave his version of events in Kansas and won their admiration and support for opposing slavery. Rather than a word of either the Bible or the Declaration of Independence be violated, Brown told Ralph Waldo Emerson in one such meeting, "a whole generation of men, women and children should pass away by a violent death."⁶⁴ Thinking that his friend was speaking metaphorically, the great philosopher nodded in approval.

Plans for the Raid

While Captain John Brown presented himself in Boston as the great Kansas freedom fighter, he was developing a plan of future action. He believed that slavery would not die a natural death. Some dramatic blow was needed to strike down this terrible institution. In 1858, Brown invaded Missouri and stole eleven slaves whom he eventually escorted to Canada. The fear this raid inspired in the South led Brown to believe that this section was ripe for revolution and could be toppled with a single blow. His conversations with abolitionists, and such famous escaped slaves as Frederick Douglass, further convinced him that the South was seething with unrest. One need only raise the banner of revolt in the South, and slaves would rally to it. Brown was determined raise that banner.

Supported by six prominent abolitionists, Brown began to plan his raid on Harper's Ferry. His patrons deliberately asked to be kept in the dark about the details of the plot, but they sent him money, weapons, and occasional recruits. Brown himself chose Harper's Ferry, Virginia, as the place to strike. That small town of 2,500 contained a Federal arsenal where 10,000 weapons were manufactured each year by expert gunsmiths. Brown thought he could hold Harper's Ferry while slaves in the area rushed to join the revolt. Then the band would move further South, arm the slaves, and spread the revolution. Eventually Virginia with her 491,000 slaves would fall; other states would soon follow.

Brown made careful preparations for his revolution. He drew up a provisional constitution for a new government, modeled after the U.S. Constitution. He had a military manual prepared especially for his purpose. He sent his son, John Jr., looking for more recruits while he trained his own army on a farm not far from Harper's Ferry. He spent hours pouring over maps, discussing strategy, and reading books on slave revolts in ancient and recent times.

The Raid on Harper's Ferry

In a party which included five free Negroes, John Brown and a total of eighteen followers descended on Harper's Ferry on Sunday, October 16, 1859. They cut telegraph lines outside the town and captured the watchmen at the bridge. Several men quickly seized the armory containing several million dollars worth of Federal arms; one contingent was sent to take hostages; another to await the slave uprising at a school house across the river. All went well until the 1am train arrived in town. It was stopped by gunfire, and the first person killed, ironically, was a free Negro porter. The shots attracted attention, and before day fully broke, the town was thoroughly aroused. Within hours, reinforcements of excited militia and angry recruits began to arrive. President Buchanan sent nearly 100 Marines under the leadership of Robert E. Lee and Jeb Stuart.

⁶⁴ Quoted in *ibid*, p. 197

Brown missed his opportunity to escape from the town. Instead, he took a position inside the railroad engine house with eleven hostages. Two attempts to bargain the hostages for safe passage were rejected as infuriated troops gunned down the men whom Brown sent out under a flag of truce. Finally, the Marines demanded unconditional surrender. When Brown refused, they stormed into the 30 X 35 foot enclosure. One leatherneck was shot in the face, another through the body, but all of Brown's men inside the engine house were either captured or killed. John Brown himself escaped death only when a sword aimed at his stomach caught on his belt buckle and doubled over.

Altogether, ten of Brown's men were killed; five were captured; and three escaped. Four civilians, including the Negro porter, were killed, and one U.S. Marine lost his life.

John Brown Speaks in His Own Defense

The effects of Brown's raid cannot be counted alone in lives lost on either side. The raid stirred controversy not matched in many years. Southerners feared that the North was teeming with abolitionists seeking to incite slaves to assault their owners' wives and children. Despite the nearly hysterical fear of a slave insurrection in the South, not a single slave was freed, voluntarily joined the revolt, or raised a hand on behalf of Brown's army. Public opinion in the North generally condemned the raid, but Brown's conduct at his trial caused many to admire him.

In the six weeks between his capture and his execution, John Brown proved to be the best advocate of his cause. Using his jail cell and later his courtroom as a platform, Brown gave hundreds of interviews, received visitors, and wrote letters, always addressing the conscience of the North. He conducted himself with such dignity and courage that even the Governor of Virginia was impressed. His letters to friends and well-wishers brought tears to the eyes of the jailer who read them. Well aware of the martyr's role he was about to play, Brown refused to plead insanity and advised friends against attempting to rescue him from prison. On November 2nd, the Virginia court pronounced the inevitable death sentence for treason, intent to incite revolt, and conspiracy to commit murder. On the day of his sentencing, Brown rose to the occasion with one of the most moving courtroom orations ever given by a condemned man:

*This court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible. That teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me, further, to remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them. I endeavor to act up to that instruction. I say, I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done – as I have always freely admitted I have done – in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, – I submit; so let it be done!*⁶⁵

Evaluation and Aftermath

After Brown was hanged by the neck on December 2nd, 1859, Ralph Waldo Emerson said that Brown made the gallows glorious like the cross. Others throughout the North also expressed their

⁶⁵ Quoted in Marvin Myers, Alexander Kern, John G. Caweltri, *Sources of the American Republic*, Scott Foresman and Company, Chicago, 1960, Vol I. p. 403.

admiration for the man who gave his life to end slavery. In the following passage African-American women of Brooklyn express their gratitude to John Brown for his sacrifice:

We truly appreciate your most noble and humane effort, and recognize in you a savior commissioned to redeem us, the American people, from the great National Sin of Slavery; and though you have apparently failed in the object of your desires, yet the influence that we believe it will eventually exert will accomplish all your intentions. We consider you a model of true patriotism, and one whom our country will yet regard as the greatest it has produced, because you have sacrificed all for its sake.

The historian Avery O. Craven, looking back on Brown's work, judged his actions far more harshly:

Stripped of all sentimental associations, the John Brown raid was nothing more or less than the efforts of a band of irresponsible armed outlaws. In open violation of all law and order, they had seized public property, kidnapped individuals, and committed murder. They had, moreover, attempted to incite a slave insurrection, and according to the laws of Virginia, had committed treason against the state.

Seventeen months after John Brown was hanged, the Civil War started with Southerners firing on Fort Sumter. Before the war ended, 600,000 Americans had died and 4 million slaves had been freed. Perhaps John Brown himself had pronounced the final judgment on his actions:

*I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood.*⁶⁶

Homework:

Was John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry justified?

Base your response on the following criteria:

- a. Purpose or ends - were the ends just
- b. Methods or means of protest - did the ends justify the means
- c. The alternatives to the action - could other, less violent means have been used
- d. The effect of the action - did the means help achieve the ends?

⁶⁶ Barrie Stavis, John Brown, *The Sword and the Word*, A.S. Barnes and Company, New York, 170), p. 174.