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John Brown, Abolitionist

*The Man Who Killed Slavery,
Sparked the Civil War,
and Seeded Civil Rights*

David S. Reynolds



VINTAGE BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
NEW YORK

FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, NOVEMBER 2006

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the Knopf edition as follows:

Reynolds, David S., [date]

John Brown, abolitionist : the man who killed
slavery, sparked the Civil War, and seeded civil
rights / David S. Reynolds.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Brown, John, 1800-1859. 2. Abolitionists—United

States—Biography. 3. Antislavery movements—United States—

History—19th century. I. Title.

E451.R49 2005

973.7'116'092—dc22

[B] 2004048864

Vintage ISBN-13: 978-0-375-72615-6

Vintage ISBN-10: 0-375-72615-2

*Author photograph © Aline Pansoy
Book design by Anthea Lingeman*

www.vintagebooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

*To Suzanne and Haig,
for their encouragement and support*

Preface

A word about my subtitle. The Abolitionist John Brown (1800–1859) did not *end* American slavery. The Thirteenth Amendment, ratified by the states six years after his death, did that. But he can be said to have *killed* slavery in the way described by his contemporary Wendell Phillips, who said that after Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, slavery was like a fallen pine, still green but dying. In a speech at Brown's funeral Phillips declared, "John Brown has loosened the roots of the slave system; it only breathes,—it does not live,—hereafter." "Kill" is an apt word for Brown, who went to murderous extremes, unlike other Abolitionists, most of whom were pacifists who disavowed violence.

By the same token, Brown did not *cause* the Civil War, which resulted from a host of social, political, and cultural forces. But he *sparked* the war to a degree that no other American did. "Begin" is the word Frederick Douglass chose: "If John Brown did not end the war that ended slavery, he did, at least, begin the war that ended slavery."

The immediate trigger of the war, of course, was the South's secession after the election of Lincoln. But the choice of Lincoln itself was influenced by the hostilities inflamed by Brown. The Republicans, tarred by their opponents with responsibility for Harpers Ferry, tried to calm sectional animosities by choosing the moderate dark horse, Lincoln, over more controversial candidates. Southern extremists, meanwhile, manipulated the panic over John Brown's raid to add fuel to the anti-Northern frenzy that led to the splintering of Lincoln's opponents into three parties, thereby ensuring his election and bringing on secession.

The polarized passions created by Brown's attack on Harpers Ferry, then, contributed to the election of Lincoln. One might posit that a Lincoln presidency would not have existed without John Brown.

Lincoln at first shrank from waging a war for emancipation, which he said would be "a John Brown raid, on a gigantic scale." But is there any question that Lincoln and his generals did not, in effect, end up following Brown's lead by condoning God-ordained violence? Think about Sherman's march, and then reconsider those who criticize Brown for using violence in the name of a higher political and religious cause.

John Brown planted seeds for the civil rights movement by making a pioneering demand for complete social and political equality for America's ethnic minorities. To be sure, many other Americans have contributed to civil rights. But only one white reformer lived continuously among blacks, penned a revised American constitution awarding them full rights, and gave his life in a violent effort to liberate the slaves. That's why the Second Niagara Movement (which became the NAACP), the forerunner of the civil rights movement, hailed Brown as one "who had no predecessors, and can have no successors." And that's why no other white person in American history has been more beloved over time among African Americans than John Brown.

It may be discomfiting to think that some of America's greatest social liberties sprang in part from a man who can be viewed as a terrorist. But John Brown was a man not only of violence but of eloquence and firmness of principle. His widely reprinted declarations against slavery impressed the intellectual leaders Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said Brown's speech to Virginia court was as great as the Gettysburg Address, and Henry David Thoreau, who declared that Brown's words were more powerful than his rifles.

Besides, Brown saw slavery as a state of war against an entire race. Sometimes a social evil is so egregious, so entrenched, that violence is the only answer. For those of John Brown's moral vision, American slavery—a system of oppression, torture, rape, and murder—had to be eliminated by any means. As it was.

John Brown declared that slavery would end only after "*very much* bloodshed" [sic]. Unfortunately, he was right.

NOTE:

In the current edition of *John Brown, Abolitionist*, I've made a few slight changes of the original book. In chapter 17, I provide fresh evidence of Brown's influence on Lincoln's election and on the war that ended slavery.

John Brown, Abolitionist

The Party

One of the most symbolic events of the Civil War occurred in a mansion. The event was the reception held on January 1, 1863, at the Medford, Massachusetts, estate of the businessman George L. Stearns to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation, which had been issued that afternoon by President Lincoln.

Stearns called the affair "the John Brown Party." The highlight of the evening was the unveiling of a marble bust of John Brown, the antislavery martyr who had died on a scaffold three years earlier after his doomed, heroic effort to free the slaves by leading a twenty-two-man raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

Brown's presence was felt elsewhere in America that day. The Union general Robert H. Milroy, stationed near Harpers Ferry, read Lincoln's proclamation aloud to his regiment, which spontaneously thundered forth the war song "John Brown's Body," with its heady chorus about Brown "mouldering in the grave" while "his soul keeps marching on." The Emancipation Proclamation made General Milroy feel as though John Brown's spirit had merged with his. "That hand-bill order," he said, "gave Freedom to the slaves through and around the region where Old John Brown was hung. I felt then that I was on duty, in the most righteous cause that man ever drew sword in."

In Boston, a tense wait had ended in midafternoon when the news came over the wires that the proclamation had been put into effect. At a Jubilee Concert in the Music Hall, Ralph Waldo Emerson read his Abolitionist poem "Boston Hymn" and was followed by performances of Handel's Hallelujah Chorus, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and Mendelssohn's "Hymn of Praise." That evening at Tremont Temple a huge crowd cheered as the proclamation was read aloud and exploded into song when Frederick

Douglass led in singing "Blow Ye the Trumpet, Blow!," the joyous hymn that had been Brown's favorite and had been sung at his funeral.

A number of people missed the Boston celebration because they had gone to George Stearns's twenty-six-acre estate in nearby Medford for the John Brown Party. The party was, in its own way, as meaningful as Lincoln's proclamation. It celebrated the man who had sparked the war that led to this historic day. Lincoln's proclamation, freeing millions of enslaved blacks, sped the process that led eventually to civil rights. John Brown's personal war against slavery had been a main catalyst of this process.

Gathered in Stearns's elegant home was a motley group. Stearns himself, long-bearded and earnest, had made a fortune manufacturing lead pipes. His guests included the bald, spectacled William Lloyd Garrison and the volatile Wendell Phillips, pioneers of Abolitionism; the stately, reserved philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, magus of Transcendentalism; his idealistic cohort Amos Bronson Alcott, who was there with his daughter, Louisa May, soon to captivate young readers with *Little Women*; Franklin Sanborn, the Concord schoolteacher whose students included children of Emerson, John Brown, and Henry James, Sr.; and the red-haired, vivacious Julia Ward Howe, writer of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." They represented cultural threads that had once been aimed in various directions but were now unified in their devotion to the memory of John Brown.

Garrison and Phillips had since the 1830s called for immediate emancipation of the slaves or, barring that, separation of the North and the South. Garrison, long committed to pacifism, had advocated moral argument as the sole means of fighting slavery until John Brown's self-sacrificing battles inspired him to espouse a more militant stance. Phillips, long driven by his disgust with slavery to curse the Constitution and the American Union, had come to espouse Brown's vision of a unified nation based on rights for people of all ethnicities.

Emerson had begun his career alienated from the antislavery cause but had taken it up with growing ~~zeal that culminated in his famous statement~~ that John Brown would make the gallows as glorious as the cross.² Along with Thoreau, who had died the ~~previous year~~ ^{year}, he had been chiefly responsible for rescuing Brown from infamy and oblivion. Alcott, too, had played a part in the resuscitation of Brown, whom he called "the type and synonym of the Just." If, as Alfred Kazin suggests, without John Brown there would have been no Civil War, we would add that without the Concord Transcendentalists, John Brown would have had little cultural impact.

And without Julia Ward Howe, John Brown may not have become fused with American myth. The wife of Samuel Gridley Howe, one of those who

had financed Brown, she wrote "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" to the tune of "John Brown's Body," retaining its "Glory, glory, hallelujah" and changing "His soul goes marching on" to "His truth is marching on." With her memorable images of a just God "trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored," and loosening "the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword" against the ~~slaveholding~~ ^{South}, she caught the essence of John Brown, a devout Calvinist who considered himself predestined to stamp out slavery. She had coupled his God-inspired antislavery passion with the North's mission and had thus helped define America.

Another of Stearns's guests, Frank Sanborn, helped define John Brown. In 1857 he had introduced Brown to several reformers who, along with him, would make up the group of Brown's backers known as the Secret Six. A zealous Brown booster, he would perpetuate the legend of the heroic Brown in his writings of the post-Civil War period.

As for George Stearns, besides having been the chief contributor of funds and arms to Brown, he was largely responsible for pushing Brown's ideal of racial justice toward civil rights. He once declared, "I consider it the proudest act of my life that I gave good old John Brown every pike and rifle he carried to Harper's Ferry." Just as Brown had assigned prominent positions to blacks in his antislavery activities, so Stearns led the recruitment of blacks for the Union army. After the war, Stearns would fight for passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave suffrage to blacks.

That these and assorted other reformers, writers, and society people would gather on Emancipation Day to honor John Brown was more than fitting. From their perspective, it was inevitable. Everyone present believed that without John Brown this day would not have come, at least not as soon as it did.

Several at the party had doubts about President Lincoln. Despite his deep hatred of slavery, Lincoln had acted with politic moderation early in his presidency. Hoping to preserve the Union by conciliating the South, he had supported the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (anathema even to some of the most conservative Northerners), had endorsed a constitutional amendment preserving slavery where it already existed, had revoked an emancipation proclamation in Missouri, and had advocated colonization for blacks, who, he said, could never live on equal terms with whites in America due to racial differences. In response, Wendell Phillips had written a bitter article, "Abraham Lincoln, Slave-hound of Illinois." Garrison was so angry that he wrote of Lincoln, "He has evidently not a drop of anti-slavery blood in his veins; and he seems incapable of uttering a humane or generous sentiment respecting the enslaved millions in our land."

As strange as such statements appear today, they were not so to those who had known John Brown and had absorbed his progressive racial views. There was good reason Stearns had organized a John Brown Party instead of an Abraham Lincoln Party.

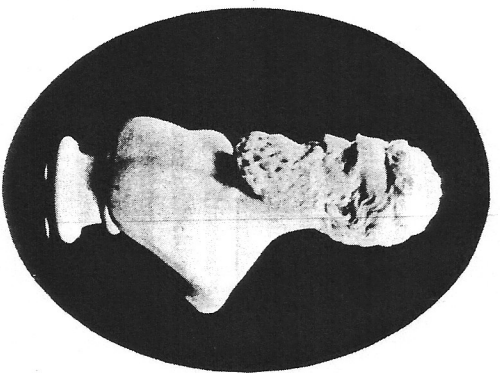
Although Stearns and his guests were overjoyed by the president's proclamation, they saw Lincoln as a latecomer to emancipation, a goal for which John Brown had given his life. In 1861, two years before Lincoln's proclamation, Stearns, Sanborn, Phillips, and other followers of Brown had formed an Emancipation League, whose aim was to win over Lincoln to the idea that freeing the slaves must be the primary mission of the Union war effort. The league issued a public document demanding emancipation "as a measure of justice, and as a military necessity." As a first step, Stearns wrote in a letter to Lincoln, black troops were needed to ensure a Union victory. Lincoln accepted the strategy after Stearns had devoted most of 1862 traveling thousands of miles throughout the North and organizing ten black regiments, including the famous 54th Massachusetts, led by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw.

The use of black soldiers was just one of Brown's forward-looking measures that impelled George Stearns to single out John Brown for tribute that evening.

Although the white marble bust of Brown, which Stearns and his wife had commissioned Edwin A. Brackett to sculpt in 1859 while the imprisoned Brown awaited execution, had long been a fixture in the Stearns mansion, unveiling it anew on Emancipation Day gave it fresh significance. The bust, which many compared to Michelangelo's *Moses*, was an idealized rendering. It invested the stern, hatchet-faced Brown with a calm Jovian dignity. It gleamed against the black walnut wainscoting on the landing of the Stearnses' curved staircase as the hushed crowd below heard Emerson read his "Boston Hymn" and Julia Ward Howe give a powerful recitation her "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

The journalist James Redpath would later see the bust in the Boston Athenaeum amid Roman statuary and would comment that it might well be Moses but certainly was not John Brown. True: But, then, who *was* John Brown?

Perhaps the most significant meaning of the John Brown Party was that everyone present was joined by an idealistic vision of a man who, in other circles, was branded as a murderer, a thief, and an insane fanatic. The pristine purity of Brackett's bust was as distant from John Brown's real looks as the starry-eyed hero worship of Stearns's guests was from a true appraisal of his achievements.



Marble bust of John Brown by Edwin A. Brackett, 1859.
BOYD STUTTGART COLLECTION OF JOHN BROWN,
WEST VIRGINIA ARCHIVES.

The fact is that during his life and after it Brown gave rise to significant misreadings that shaped the course of American history. Brown himself had misread the slaves and sympathetic whites among the locals, whom he expected to rally in masses to his side as soon as his raid on Harpers Ferry began. The blacks he liberated misread him, since, by most reports, few of them voluntarily joined him in the battle against the Virginia troops—a fact that may have contributed to the fatal delay on the part of Brown, who had expected "the bees to hive" as soon as his liberation plan became known among the slaves.

Most important, Brown himself became the subject of crucial misreadings. Although after the raid he was at first denounced by most Northerners, a few influential individuals, especially the Transcendentalists, salvaged his reputation by placing him on the level of Christ—a notable misreading of a man who, despite his remarkable virtues, had violent excesses, as evidenced by the nighttime slaughter of five proslavery residents he had directed in Pottawatomie, Kansas. The Transcendentalist image of Brown spread throughout the North and was fanned by books, melodramas, poems, and music—culminating in "John Brown's Body," the inspiring song chanted by tens of thousands of Union troops as they marched south.

At the same time that this misreading swept the North, an opposite one was pervading the South. The South's initial grudging admiration for Brown's courage was quickly overwhelmed by a paranoid fear that he was a malicious aggressor who represented the entire North—a tremendous and tragic misreading, since virtually everyone in the Northern-led Republican Party, from Lincoln to Seward, actually disapproved of his violent tactics. The South's misreading was fanned by Democratic Party propaganda that unjustifiably smeared the Republicans with responsibility for Harpers Ferry. In this view, "Black Republicanism" meant not only "nigger-worship" but also deep alliance with John Brown, whom the Democrats characterized as a villain of the blackest dye.

These dual misreadings, positive and negative, were perpetuated in biographies of Brown. The early biographers were mainly people who had known Brown personally and who idolized him—they therefore twisted facts to make him seem heroic, at times godlike. In reaction, there arose a school of biographers intent upon exploding this saintly image. They swung to the other extreme of portraying him as little more than a cold-blooded murderer, horse thief, inflexible egotist, fanatical visionary, and shady businessman.

These extremes of hagiography and vilification were in time answered by scholarly objectivity. Several biographers—most notably Oswald Garrison Villard and Stephen B. Oates—present information about Brown's life factually, unfiltered by partisan bias. Villard and Oates pitilessly expose Brown's savagery at Pottawatomie and question the wisdom of his provisional constitution and his attack on Harpers Ferry, even as they praise his humanitarian aims.

Still, there is a danger to an overstrict insistence on impartiality. One reviewer's comment on Villard—i.e., that he "holds a position of impartiality, and almost of aloofness"—speaks for the best modern biographies. For example, biographers have waffled on the issue of Brown's sanity, leaving it as an unsolved problem. One can be objective without remaining impartial about the crucial moral, political, and human issues that Brown's life poses.

My stand on some key issues is: (a) Brown was not insane; instead, he was a deeply religious, flawed, yet ultimately noble reformer; (b) the Pottawatomie affair was indeed a crime, but it was what today would be called a war crime committed against proslavery settlers by a man who saw slavery itself as an unprovoked war of one race against another; and (c) neither Brown's provisional constitution nor the Harpers Ferry raid were wild-eyed, erratic schemes doomed to failure; instead, they reflect Brown's over-

confidence in whites' ability to rise above racism and in blacks' willingness to rise up in armed insurrection against their masters.

The current book develops these and other arguments by placing Brown fully in historical context. This is emphatically a *cultural* biography, a term that demands explanation. Cultural biography is based on the idea that human beings have a dynamic, dialogic relationship to many aspects of their historical surroundings, such as politics, society, literature, and religion.

The special province of the cultural biographer is to explore this relationship, focusing on three questions: How does my subject *reflect* his or her era? How does my subject *transcend* the era—that is, what makes him or her unique? What *impact* did my subject have on the era?

Cultural biography takes an Emersonian approach to the human subject. As Emerson writes, "the ideas of the time are in the air, and infect all who breathe it . . . We learn of our contemporaries what they know without effort, and almost through the pores of our skin." The cultural biographer explores the historical "air" surrounding the subject and describes the process by which the air seeped through the pores of his or her skin. "Great geniuses are parts of the times," Melville wrote; "they themselves are the times, and possess a correspondent coloring." Once the biographer accepts the cultural environment as a viable area of study, new vistas of information and insight open up. John Brown emerges in cultural biography not as an isolated, insane antislavery terrorist but as an amalgam of social currents—religious, reformist, racial, and political—that found explosive realization in him.

Most standard biographies, of course, contain some information about a subject's historical milieu. Cultural biography, however, analyzes this milieu not as window dressing—not as something "out there," on the fringes of personal life—but rather as a dynamic entity constantly seeping into the subject's psyche and shaping his or her behavior. Character traits usually explained psychologically have social dimensions. Cultural signifiers color the most private thoughts. If John Brown's effort to wipe out slavery by raiding Virginia with a tiny band of men seems absurd when viewed as an isolated military act, it makes sense when seen in light of the slave revolts, guerilla warfare, and revolutionary Christianity that were major sources of inspiration for him.

Cultural biography illuminates not only the subject's life but also national history. John Jay Chapman noted in 1910, "John Brown and his raid are an epitome, a popular summary of the history of the United States

between the Missouri Compromise and the Gettysburg celebration. . . . He is as big as myth, and the story of him is an immortal legend—perhaps the only one in our history.” Similarly, the novelist Albion Tourgée wrote, “John Brown! . . . Cause and Consequence! . . . The climax of one age and the harbinger of another!”

Despite such statements made long ago, little has been done to fit John Brown into American history. Although the Harpers Ferry raid is widely acknowledged as a major event leading to the Civil War, the historical forces that contributed to and resulted from the raid have yet to be described with care. A main obstacle to a historical understanding of Brown has been the long-standing view of him as a crazed fanatic with few links to mainstream American history. A large part of this book is devoted to tracing such links. As shall be seen, placing John Brown fully in his times freshly illuminates, among other things, the legacy of Puritanism, the significance of slave revolts, the varieties of antislavery activism, racial attitudes, the social impact of Transcendentalism, and, more generally, the causes of the Civil War. Literary history, too, is illuminated, since many imaginative writers—Melville, Whitman, Whittier, Victor Hugo, to name a few—wrote eloquently about Brown. Finally, new dimensions of popular culture come to light, since Brown was a cultural icon variously championed and denigrated in popular literature, music, and art.

A potential danger of using a subject's life to explore history is that the subject can get lost in the process. If a person is described as an amalgam of social and cultural currents, what happens to the notion of individuality? Since society and culture influence everybody, why is it that we isolate one person from the rest? What makes him or her special?

Cultural biography, rightly executed, reveals not only how a subject reflects the social environment but also how he or she *transcends* it. Once again Emerson's philosophy sheds light on the subject. In Emerson's view the “representative” human being mirrors the social environment while at the same time remaining unique. Emerson's most memorable concept, self-reliance, asserts the utterly original, self-contained nature of the fully developed individual. Cultural biography can lapse into flaccid history without repeated reminders of the ways in which the subject, while influenced by cultural surroundings, contributed something new, often startlingly so, as a result of his or her unique angle of vision.

A comparison of John Brown with his contemporary Walt Whitman is useful here, since they were people of different temperaments and convictions responding to the same set of social conditions. Their most memorable contributions—the early editions of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and

Brown's antislavery activities in Kansas and Virginia—occurred almost simultaneously, between 1855 and 1860. The two men shared a deep concern for the fate of their nation, which they saw torn over slavery. The distinction between the two lies in their radically different, wholly original responses to the national crisis. Whitman, fearing the impending separation of the North and the South, created all-embracing poetry meant to become a model of togetherness and cohesion for the divided nation. Brown, concerned solely with ending slavery, resorted to violence to disrupt the South's peculiar institution. Whitman sought to provide America with healing and reconciliation through poetic language; Brown sought to purge America of its greatest injustice through military action.

Although both envisaged a transformed American society in which people of all races enjoyed equal rights, the method each chose to bring about this society was unique. Whitman's sweeping, inclusive free verse and all-absorbing poetic persona were unlike anything else in antebellum literature. Likewise, Brown's brand of antislavery terrorism was sui generis. An important task of my cultural biography is to identify *how* John Brown was unique in his espousal of violence and *why* he became so.

As Emerson saw perhaps more clearly than anyone else did, a person's uniqueness need not isolate him or her from the surrounding culture. To the contrary, the more confidently individualistic someone is, the greater the influence that person is likely to have. The self-reliant individual has social repercussions. “A man Caesar is born,” Emerson wrote, “and for ages after we have a Roman Empire. . . . An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man; as, the Reformation, of Luther; Quakerism, of Fox; Methodism, of Wesley; Abolition, of Clarkson. . . . [A]ll history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons.”

Whereas standard biographies typically end with the subject's death, cultural biography recognizes that in many cases death is just the start of a person's real significance. One of the Transcendentalists' paradoxical points about John Brown was that he didn't truly live until he had died. “He is more alive than he ever was,” Thoreau said after Brown was hanged. “He has earned immortality. . . . He is no longer working in secret. He works in public, and in the clearest light that shines on this land.”

To gauge Brown's impact properly, the cultural biographer must analyze his powerful influence on the Civil War. At the end of the war, Emerson wrote in his journal, “It has been impossible to keep the name & fame of John Brown out of the war from the first to the last.” He was right. The disgruntled proslavery journalist Charles Chauncey Burr, confronted with the South's impending defeat, in 1863 castigated Lincoln for having waged “a

stupendous John Brown raid" on the South. Tracing Lincoln's war aims to John Brown, Burr lamented, "No man can support such a war without being a disciple and follower of the old thief and assassin of Osawatimic [i.e., Brown].... You are either for Lincolnism or against it."

There was some truth in Burr's assessment of the Civil War as a "John Brown raid" on a large scale. The war increasingly reflected John Brown's strategies and goals. In 1861, at the beginning of the war, Lincoln's main aim was not to stamp out slavery but to save the Union; as seen, his pronouncements about the war seemed so conservative with regard to slavery that Abolitionists like Garrison and Phillips excoriated him. By 1863, following the lead of John Brown's supporters, Lincoln had become a warrior for emancipation. The Gettysburg Address, following on the heels of the Emancipation Proclamation, mirrored John Brown's social vision, since it broadened American egalitarianism, as described in the Declaration of Independence, to include blacks. Moreover, Lincoln's embrace of the tactics of "total war," as waged by his generals Sherman and Grant, echoed John Brown's approach to ending slavery through all-out violence. Like John Brown before them, they were willing to take extreme measures, including attacks on civilians, to defeat their proslavery enemies. Given Lincoln's increasingly Brown-like vision, it is understandable that his Second Inaugural Address, in which he declared that a sternly judgmental God might make the war last "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword," coupled antislavery passion with Calvinistic images in a manner strikingly reminiscent of many of Brown's pronouncements.

Brown's long-term impact has been manifested in many ways, perhaps most significantly among African Americans. Viewed as a whole, Brown's career anticipated a panoply of civil rights goals, some of which America is still struggling to achieve. The right to vote; the right to participate in government; the right to be paid equally for equal work; and the right to live in an integrated society free of prejudice—John Brown had envisaged all these rights for blacks and other minority groups. No other white person, not even Lincoln, has been so widely admired among American blacks as has John Brown. W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, and many other prominent figures have extolled him. Although the fully integrated society Brown envisaged, in which people of all races and both sexes participate equally in America's democratic system, is still far from being realized, social conscience on racial issues has improved markedly as a result of increasing acceptance of the ideals he lived and died for.

Which takes us back to the John Brown Party at George Stearns's home

on Emancipation Day. Stearns, the champion of civil rights policies he had learned from Brown, chose the African American J. B. Smith to cater his function. Even though Smith, who had distinguished himself by earning a living catering functions at Harvard, was usually punctilious about collecting money for his work, he refused to bill the Stearnses for the evening. He wanted to contribute his services in honor of the man who had given his life to free 4 million members of his race.

2

The Puritan

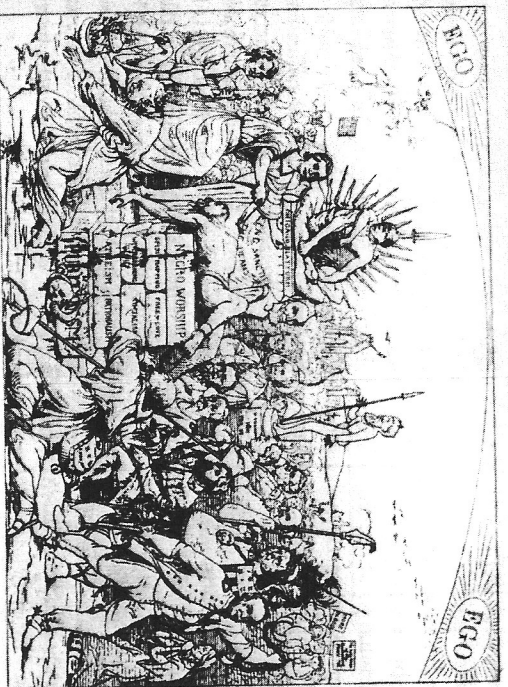
A Southern political cartoon of 1863 spoke volumes about the paranoia John Brown had aroused in the Confederacy. The cartoon, titled "Worship of the North," pictures an altar with the word PURITANISM blazoned across its base and FREE-LOVE, SPIRIT RAPING, ATHEISM, and NEGRO worship on the bricks above it. On the altar sits an ugly Lincoln, beside whom lies the dying American Union. Flanking the altar are antislavery leaders of the Republican Party, including Charles Sumner and William Henry Seward. An African in tribal dress looms at the side of the group holding an odd-looking spear. Hovering over all are Satan and a statue of John Brown, both also holding spears.

The cartoon illustrates the often-neglected fact that the Civil War was far more than a struggle between the North and the South over social issues such as slavery, economics, and states rights. These social issues were intensified by profound cultural differences, real and perceived. John Brown was at the epicenter of this conflict.

The South's view of him as a demonic Northerner is made clear in the cartoon, where his statue stands like an idol above the altar on the same level as Satan. From the South's perspective, the "Worship of the North" was devil worship, and John Brown was Satan's main accomplice.

The spears held by the statue, Satan, and the African represent the pikes John Brown had distributed at Harpers Ferry among the blacks he temporarily freed from slavery. He had designed the pikes, made of bowie knives attached to poles, to be used as weapons by the blacks against white pursuers. For Southerners, the John Brown pike epitomized the twin horrors of Northern aggression and slave revolts.

The other images in the cartoon were also linked with the satanic Brown. Lincoln and his antislavery cronies, from this Southern perspective,



"Worship of the North" (proslavery political cartoon, unattributed).

BOYD STUTTLER COLLECTION OF JOHN BROWN,
WEST VIRGINIA ARCHIVES.

were Brown's worshipers. The moribund American Union was his victim. The armed African was the product of his raid, as was the North's sympathy for blacks, parodied in the racist phrase ~~NEGRO~~ worship.

The remaining words on the altar indicated the depth of the South's hostility. ~~SPIRIT RAPING~~ and ~~FREE-LOVE~~ were two of the countless "isms" the South associated with Northern society. Movements such as spiritualism, free love, Fourierism, Transcendentalism, and women's rights had, in fact, sprouted prolifically in the antebellum North, a society caught in the throes of reform and creative ferment. These Northern movements prompted both disgust and smugness in the South. For Southerners, Northern society was wild and ~~amoral~~, given to ever-shifting fads that were essentially goddess (hence the ATHEISM on the cartoon altar). Abolitionism was an especially wicked example of Northern fanaticism. The South, which considered itself a stable society supported by the "civilizing" institution of slavery, regarded the North as a chaos of homegrown theories rooted in that Ur-source of subversiveness: New England Puritanism.

The PURITANISM at the base of the cartoon was as telling as was the Brown statue at the top. From the South's perspective, seventeenth-century

Puritanism had contributed to the Northern cultural evils that found their culmination in Brown.

Normally, Puritanism does not factor in histories of the Civil War. A widely held view is that Puritanism, far from stirring up warlike emotions, had by the nineteenth century softened into a benign faith in America's millennial promise. Supposedly, it buttressed mainstream cultural values, fostering consensus and conformity.

For many in the Civil War era, however, Puritanism meant radical individualism and subversive social agitation. In 1863, the Democratic congressman Samuel Cox typically blamed the Civil War on disruptive New England reform movements that he said were rooted in Puritanism. He insisted that fanatical Abolitionism caused the war, and, in his words, "Abolition is the offspring of Puritanism. . . . Puritanism is a reptile which has been boring into the mound, which is the Constitution, and this civil war comes in like a devouring seal." Charles Chauncey Burr, another defender of the South, bewailed "this terrible Puritan war." Burr painted the history of the North as a dark drama of aggressive Puritanism:

The nature of Puritanism is to tolerate nothing that it dislikes, and to fight every thing that dislikes it. . . . Nothing escapes it. About a third of a century ago it drove at slavery—swore that it would either break up slavery, or break up the Union. . . . It organized, sent forth agents and lecturers, printed tracts and newspapers, to fill the Northern mind full of its own fanaticism, and to teach the slaves how to poison or murder their masters. . . . On, on, this implacable Puritanism drove, destroying social unity, and sowing the seeds of anarchy, despotism and war, until its harvest of death was ready to be gathered.

This demonization of Puritanism made its way into Southern war songs, such as "The Southern Cross," which painted the South as peaceful and free until ruined by the "Puritan" North:

*How peaceful and blest was America's soil,
Till betrayed by the guile of the Puritan demon,
Which lurks under virtue, and springs from its coil,
To fasten its fangs in the life blood of freemen.*

What linked Puritanism with Northern reform was its powerful heritage of antinomianism—the breaking of human law in the name of God. Antinomian rebels from Anne Hutchinson onward put divine grace above

social codes. In the nineteenth century this spirit fostered a law-flouting individualism that appeared variously in militant Abolitionism, Transcendentalist self-reliance, and the "individual sovereignty" championed by anarchists and free-love activists—a pervasive individualism parodied in "Worship of the North" by the word ego that beams from two suns in the top corners of the cartoon.

Northerners, like Southerners, associated these movements with radical Puritanism, but often from a positive perspective. In his 1844 lecture "New England Reformers," Emerson declared that the "fertile forms of antinomianism among the elder puritans seemed to have their match in the plenty of the new harvest of reform." Emerson admired the self-reliant spirit behind the reforms. "In each of these movements," he said, "emerged a good result, an assertion of the sufficiency of the private man." A Northern journalist went so far as to say: "Puritanism and nothing else can save this nation. . . . The Puritan element, which demands religious freedom, as the birth-right of Heaven, in matters spiritual, is the nourisher of that civil liberty which releases the body from secular despotism in matters temporal."

Northern soldiers were proud to accept the sobriquet "Puritan." A Union marching song, "My Northern Boy to the War Has Gone" pictured a Union soldier at Antietam carrying his grandfather's sword, which linked him to the Puritan past:

*His Puritan Grandfather's sword gleamed bright
Where hosts were in strife engaging;
And many a Rebel eye clos'd in night,
While the contest fierce was raging!*

Southerners made a contrast between the supposedly refined Norman "cavaliers" who they said occupied the South and the lowly Saxon "Puritans" of the North. Blaming the Civil War on "the irreconcilable antithesis and utter incompatibility of the two sections," one writer typically declared that the real conflict was between the "cavalier element predominating in Southern civilization" and the "Puritan element which underlies the fabric of Northern civilization." Stressing this "antithesis of the Puritan and Cavalier," the writer insisted that the North's uncontrolled democracy would foster endless social revolutions there, whereas the slave system kept the South orderly and structured. Another journalist claimed that the Northern Puritan is "at once a religious fanatic and a political agitator and reformer," while the Southern Cavalier was "the builder, the social architect, the institutionalist, the conservator." Yet another contrasted "the

principles of [Northern] Calvinistic *insubordination* and [Southern] Episcopal *subordination*. The first is iconoclastic in all things. The second teaches respect and reverence in all things. The first aids all effort to destroy the Constitution. The second assists all effort to maintain the Constitution."

How accurate were these generalizations about the Southern cavalier? Not very. While it's true that many aristocratic families had fled to the American South when Oliver Cromwell drove them out of England in 1651, by the mid nineteenth century the Southern white population did not wholly—or even predominantly—derive from blue-blooded cavalier stock.

As history often reminds us, though, cultural myths can be just as powerful as facts. When Mark Twain said that the historical novelist Walter Scott caused the Civil War by fanning the South's pride in its "chivalric" heritage, he tapped into the self-deception inherent in the myth of the noble cavalier. To cover up the horrors of slavery, the South paraded sociological half-truths and ersatz history. How convenient to present slavery as a "civilizing" institution that allowed cultured whites to care for ignorant blacks! One article on the Southern cavalier said, "The institution of domestic slavery alone has sufficed to make the South conservative and religious, and its absence to render the North anarchical and infidel." Another described slavery as "a benevolent system of tutelage by a superior race over an inferior race," emphasizing the crucial importance of sustaining the institution: "Let us strengthen slavery by every possible appliance, regarding that institution as the very base, the corner-stone of our system, which once rudely framed, the whole superstructure will totter in the imminent peril of hopeless ruin."

What about the notion of the North as Puritan? That, too, was only partly accurate. Although the North had been Puritan during the seventeenth century, by 1850 it had become so polyglot that the term described it inadequately. One nineteenth-century Northerner, however, *was* a bona fide Puritan: John Brown.

For the South, Brown was the natural result of anarchical, criminal Puritanism. Samuel Cox, to illustrate his point that "the history of Puritanism is a catalogue of murders, maimings, extortions, and outrages," noted the appropriateness of the North's favorite war song, "John Brown's Body," which he called "a hymn of apotheosis to a horse-thief and a murderer." Another proslavery commentator generalized: "Everybody who ever saw a Puritan, or who ever heard or read of a Puritan, knows that from the days of Calvin and Knox, down to those of Cotton Mather, and still later to . . . John Brown—everybody knows that they have been the same

arrogant, self-righteous, concealed race—each man thinking and acting on the belief of his own infallibility and of other people's fallibility."

If the South saw Brown as an arrogant lawbreaker, the North, once it overcame its initial doubts about him, heralded him as a freedom-fighter in the Puritan tradition. His uniqueness among nineteenth-century Americans is captured in many contemporary accounts of him as a throwback to an earlier era. Franklin Sanborn remarked, "He was, in truth, a Calvinistic Puritan, born a century or two after the fashion had changed, but as ready as those of Bradford's or Cromwell's time had been to engage in any work of the Lord to which he felt himself called." Another associate called him "a Puritan of the Puritans," and another commented: "In religion and character Brown was the last of the Puritans." The Abolitionist Richard J. Hinton, similarly, described him as "a puritan brought back from the days of Cromwell or a vision of the old Revolutionary times, to show the world that all the fearless energy and strong integrity that characterized these epochs, has not yet faded out."

Both enemies and friends of John Brown, then, considered him a deep-dyed Puritan. They were right. He was a Calvinist who admired the works of Jonathan Edwards. He was proud of his family roots in New England Puritanism. He patterned himself after the Puritan warrior Cromwell, to whom he was often compared. He had an astounding sincerity of faith, so that his letters and speeches were more often than not lay sermons. He was willing to die for his utter belief in the word of the Bible, which he interpreted without mediator, like a true Puritan.

Like the arch-Puritan Cromwell before him, he came to have a notably divided reputation, with many seeing him as a bloodthirsty terrorist and others viewing him as a saintly liberator. The truth is that, like Cromwell, he was both of these things. He was a terrorist *because of* his own interpretation of Puritan beliefs. Far from enforcing tame conformity, Puritanism unleashed militant individualism and warfare against institutions.

How could Puritanism fuse with antislavery passion with such intensity in John Brown that he believed he could single-handedly free America's 4 million slaves? His family background and his early life in Connecticut and Ohio yield some clues.

John Brown's paternal ancestry reached to early Puritan times, though the details are unclear. Some genealogists say that he was descended from the carpenter Peter Brown, who arrived in America on the *Mayflower* in 1620, resided in Plymouth and then Duxbury, was married twice and had four children, and died in 1634. Others claim that the family began in

America with another Peter Brown, who settled in Connecticut around 1650.

I find the *Mayflower* story plausible. Brown and his contemporaries were certain of it. In his 1857 autobiographical letter to the young Henry Stearns, Brown, using the third person, identified himself as "a descendant on the side of his Father of one of the company of the Mayflower who landed at Plymouth 1620."²⁰

In any case, what matters is that Brown's earliest male ancestor was a New England Puritan. By the mid-seventeenth century, the Browns were in Windsor, Connecticut, where Peter Brown (1632-92) and his wife, Mary, raised four sons, the oldest of whom, John, became the first of four John Browns of successive generations, including a Revolutionary War captain and his grandson, the martyr of Harpers Ferry.

On his mother's side, Brown descended from Peter Wouter van der Meulen of Amsterdam, who fled Holland soon after the siege of Leyden, settling, like the Browns, in Windsor. His son, known as "Peter the Miller," anglicized the family name to Mills. Peter's son Gideon entered the ministry after graduating from Yale and died before the American Revolution. His son, also Gideon Mills (the grandfather of John Brown), served as a lieutenant in the war and in 1800 moved to Ohio.

Religious devotion was intense on both sides of the family. John Brown was related on his father's side to the Reverend Naham Brown, a missionary to India and Japan, and on his mother's to the well-known Reverend Luther Humphrey and the Reverend Dr. Heman Humphrey, one of the first presidents of Amherst College.

Calvinistic piety filled the life of John Brown's father. Born in West Simsbury, Connecticut, in 1771, Owen Brown was five when his father, who had joined the Connecticut 18th Regiment as a captain, died of dysentery in a Continental Army camp north of New York City. Owen and his ten siblings were left in the care of his resolute but long-suffering mother, who struggled to keep the family fed. Owen recalled her as "one of the best of mothers, active and sensible," but the crops failed for lack of help, and the brutal winter of 1778-79 killed off most of the livestock. To economize, she sent Owen to live with his married sister, Asubah, who trained him in reading and religion. After a year he moved back home and helped raise corn and wheat. He then lived briefly with another relative, Elijah Hill, who worked him hard and paid him little. By 1782 he was home again. That

²⁰Because of the large number of errors in spelling, grammar, and usage in Brown's writings and other primary texts, I do not use "[sic]" for each error. The quotations are in their original form.

summer a religious revival swept the area, causing the conversion of his mother, his older sisters, and a brother.

The revival was a major turning point for Owen Brown, who devoted much of the rest of his life to a search for signs of salvation in himself and his loved ones. Calvinists believed that a sovereign God freely gave grace to totally depraved humans, certain of whom He "elected" to be saved. Predestined to go either to heaven or to hell, humans received conversion not as a reward for good works but as a gift arbitrarily bestowed by the Divine Judge. Angry because of Adam's disobedience, God mercifully sent Christ to rescue some souls from eternal damnation. Conversion, which was an opening up to this freely given grace, brought delight but not complacency. For example, the famous preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards testified that after his conversion he tasted the sweetness of God's grace but at the same time became far more conscious of his own sinfulness and helplessness than he had been before it.

Owen knew that although he had already won "the name of a good boy," he could not be sure he was one of God's elect. He turned wholly to religion, hoping to receive assurance of grace. With his family he studied the Bible constantly and joined a church choir, entering "into an association with the better class of people." Around 1784 the Reverend Jeremiah Hall of the West Simsbury Congregational Church began taking him into his home for periodic religious instruction. A thin, sober teenager with an embarrassing stutter, Owen spent his summers farming and the rest of the time learning the craft of shoemaking. At sixteen he became a traveling cobbler, going from town to town in nearby Massachusetts, returning home the next year to resume his farming and shoemaking there. All the while his mind was on God. He was delighted when the Reverend Hallock hired him for six months, giving him more religious lessons. At that time Owen "was under some conviction of sin" (a good sign) but still wasn't sure about salvation. He later recalled, in self-flagellating Calvinist fashion, "Whether I was pardoned or not, God only knows—this I know I have not lived like a Christian."

When he was twenty, he met the prim, chaste Ruth Mills. A descendant of Congregationalists and Presbyterians, with ministers in her family background, she was ideal for him. He courted her for two years, and on February 13, 1793, they were married in West Simsbury. The Reverend Hallock worried like a parent over the newlyweds' spiritual state, but he could have spared his concern, for they were strongly focused on religion. As devout a Calvinist as her husband, Ruth helped keep his thoughts trained on God. He declared, "I never had any person such an assendence over my conduct



Owen Brown, father of John Brown.
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

as my wife... and if I have been respected in the World I must ascribe it more to her than to any other Person."

The couple moved to Norfolk, Connecticut, enjoying a modest prosperity as result of Ruth's frugality and Owen's hard work as a farmer, tanner, and shoemaker. But adversity soon arrived. In 1794, Ruth bore a son, Salmon, who died when he was two, and a year later a second child died shortly after birth. Both husband and wife took ill, and the tanning business suffered. But the last two years of the century brought new blessings. A daughter, Anna, was born in July 1798, and a series of religious revivals that began that year led both Owen and Ruth to feel assured of their salvation. As Owen would recall, "My wife and self made a profession of religion, which I had so poorly manifested in my life."

Like other orthodox Calvinists, Owen could believe himself saved and yet never be free of self-doubt or fear for the souls of his loved ones. To the end of his days, he would express worry over the spiritual condition of those close to him. If a child died, his first concern was whether he or she "died in Christ." Even after a lifetime of praying and Bible-reading, he would begin

his scribbled autobiography with this self-critical statement: "My life has been of little worth. Mostly filled up with vanity."

Uncertain of his spiritual state, he nonetheless was definite about a key social issue, American slavery, which he saw as sinful. The Revolutionary War had liberated America from England but had not freed enslaved blacks. The war left slavery intact in twelve of the thirteen states, including all but one in the North (Vermont). Owen was familiar with slavery from his childhood in Connecticut, where slaves were used on farms. At one point his widowed mother, needing help with the crops, had borrowed a neighbor's slave, Sam, a native of Guinea on the African coast. Owen loved playing with the kindly Sam, who carried him on his back, and he was devastated when Sam suddenly died.

If Owen accepted slavery as a child, he came to detest it in early manhood. After slavery had been abolished in Connecticut by gradual emancipation acts in 1784 and 1787, he overheard the Reverend Hallock discourse on the immorality of slavery to a minister from Rhode Island, where slavery still existed. Also, Hallock showed Owen an antislavery sermon by Jonathan Edwards, Jr.

What further ignited Owen's hatred of slavery was an episode of the 1790s that prefigured the Dred Scott case. A Southern clergyman had traveled north during the Revolution and had left a family of slaves in Norfolk, Connecticut, for reasons of safety. In 1797 or '98, he returned to Norfolk to reclaim the slaves, who resisted him, saying they were now Northerners. The male slave managed to escape, but his wife and children were left in the hands of their ex-master. At a local hearing the minister argued that as a resident of a Southern state he was justified in claiming his property. He was roundly criticized by a panel of local residents, and evidently he returned south without the slaves. Owen later said of the incident: "Ever since, I have been an Abolitionist; I am so near the end of my life I think I shall die an Abolitionist." Indeed, he became a reliable agent for the Underground Railroad, and he once withdrew his support from Western Reserve College in Ohio because it refused to admit blacks.

Into this unusual family atmosphere of fervent Calvinism and equally fervent Abolitionism, John Brown was born on May 9, 1800, in Torrington, Connecticut. Had he appeared at a different historical moment, it is quite possible that Harpers Ferry would not have happened—if so, the Civil War might have been delayed, and slavery might not have been abolished in America as soon as it was. Given the importance of that moment, it is worthwhile to reflect on the antislavery sentiment of that time.

There was no organized Abolitionist movement yet. That would come

in 1832 with William Lloyd Garrison's New England Anti-Slavery Society. The founding fathers had given a mixed message about slavery. Jefferson had written human equality into the Declaration of Independence and had prophesied that slavery would eventually lead to a cataclysmic war between the races. But he believed that if the slaves were ever freed they would have to be colonized abroad, and he himself owned over a hundred slaves. George Washington was also a slave-owner. Although the Constitution didn't condone slavery—or even mention it—it tacitly recognized it in its provision for returning “fugitives from labor,” its instructions to Congress for quelling insurrections, and the three-fifths clause, which counted three-fifths of each state's slave population when apportioning congressional representation.

Abolitionism, such as it was, came in bits and spurts. The earliest anti-slavery writings voiced sentiments that John Brown would later act upon. The Calvinist judge Samuel Sewall in his 1700 pamphlet *The Selling of Joseph* argued that slavery violated the Golden Rule. “Whosoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so them,” he wrote, applied to blacks, since “These *Ethiopians*, as black as they are; seeing they are the Sons and Daughters of the First *Adam*, the Brethren and sisters of the last *ADAM*, and the offspring of *GOD*; They ought to be treated with a Respect agreeable.” An obvious Christian point, it would seem. Yet in the two centuries after Sewall made it, shockingly few white Christians admitted that blacks were included in the Golden Rule. An exception was the British revivalist George Whitefield, who during a tour of America in 1739 denounced slavery in a public letter to Southern slaveholders, telling them that it was sinful to use slaves “worse than if they were brutes” and warning, “*The blood of them, spilt for these many years, in your respective provinces, will ascend up to heaven against you!*” Another exception was the New Jersey Quaker John Woolman, who in 1746 reminded slave-owners of the Bible's statements that God “was no respecter of persons” (that is, God's rule was above all human rules) and that holding slaves was “not . . . doing as we would be done by.” John Brown would use both the “no respecter of persons” phrase and the Golden Rule as moral weapons against the slave power.

His other main weapon was the Declaration of Independence. He once explained his antislavery stance to George Stearns: “I believe in the Golden Rule, sir, and the Declaration of Independence. I think that both mean the same thing; and it is better that a whole generation should pass off the face of the earth—men, women, and children—by a violent death than that one jot of either should fail in this country. I mean exactly so, sir.”

This conflation of the Golden Rule, the Declaration, and visions of apocalyptic violence was extremely unusual for its day. It was made by someone who was descended on both sides from Revolutionary War soldiers and who was born into a Calvinistic family in a state that was among the first to emancipate slaves.

Intense Calvinism and a republican belief in human rights would combine uniquely in John Brown. He never surrendered the Calvinistic doctrines—predestination, total depravity, God's sovereignty, and so forth—he had learned from his parents. Their religion was not the modified Calvinism of nineteenth-century preachers like Charles Grandison Finney or Lyman Beecher, who made room for human agency. Instead, it harked back to the orthodox Calvinism of Puritan times. Owen Brown, describing his conversion, said of the religious revivals of 1798–99: “Perhaps there has never been so general a revival since the days of Edwards and Whitfield.” He was linking his conversion to the Great Awakening of the 1740s, when the Massachusetts minister Jonathan Edwards and the traveling British revivalist George Whitefield had prompted mass conversions through their Calvinistic preaching. The most famous sermon in American history, Edwards's “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” was delivered in 1741 in Enfield (then in Massachusetts), a few miles from where the Brown family lived.

The fact that Owen Brown prized the tradition of Jonathan Edwards, whose works John Brown would read along with the Bible, reveals the strength of the family's connection to the Puritan past. The Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards was total. For him, God was *absolutely* sovereign, and humans were *absolutely* helpless in the face of God's power. There was no middle ground. Nor would there be for John Brown, who believed that God determined everything. He would tell Frederick Douglass that God had made the Allegheny Mountains as a haven for escaped slaves. When his Harpers Ferry raid misfired, he considered it predestined. As he wrote a friend from his Virginia prison, “The disgrace of hanging does not trouble me in the least. In fact, I know that the very errors by which my scheme was marred were decreed before the world was made.”

There was, however, a key distinction between the religion of Edwards and that of Brown. The latter's was permeated with a republican insistence on social rights for all. The American Revolution had made a difference. Its impact was visible in Jonathan Edwards's clergyman son, who shaped Brown's Abolitionism. The religion of Jonathan Edwards, Jr., was perhaps even more severe than his father's, since he described the delights of salvation with less passion than had the elder Edwards, while he still emphasized

sin and damnation. But the younger Edwards devoted himself to combating not only his father's main opponent—liberal religion—but also the institution of slavery. Like Jefferson, Edwards Jr. had a belief in social equality that fostered a hatred of slavery. But he had neither Southern loyalties nor slaves that qualified this hatred.

Why, though, did the younger Edwards, and John Brown after him, adopt Abolitionism when most other Calvinists of their day did not? The fusion of Abolitionism and Puritanism can be seen as a rare product of Protestant ferment at a moment when republican feelings were fresh and the disestablishment of religion had recently occurred. John Brown may have thought he was predestined from all eternity to free the slaves, but in fact it was by mere chance that he was born at a moment when American Protestantism had just hit the fan of disestablishment, sending it in all kinds of directions. In the seventy years just after the Revolution, an amazing variety of Protestantisms would arise. To give some notorious examples, the Shakers would recommend celibacy, the perfectionists under John Humphrey Noyes would introduce complex marriage (communal marriage among believers), the Millerites would predict the imminent end of the world, and the Mormons would practice polygamy—all under the aegis of Protestant Christianity.

By the mid twentieth century more than 250 Protestant sects and denominations would exist in America. Each would announce itself as the final word about God and the Bible, when in fact each was a mutation of ever-evolving American Protestantism. The Abolitionist Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards, Jr., and Owen Brown's family was no exception to the rule. It was a chance mutation. Unlike many other Protestant mutations, which gave rise to large churches, it won few converts because of the near-universal racism of American whites at that time.

In the early going, most Protestant offshoots arose in the North. The South remained the domain of more conservative Protestant strains such as Episcopalianism and Methodism. Small wonder that Southerners called Abolitionism another bizarre Northern Protestant craze. Northern Calvinism, with its emphasis on individual interpretations of the Bible, seemed especially culpable to the South. As George Fitzhugh, the South's leading critic of Abolitionism, argued, "History will show that Geneva [John Calvin's home] was the birthplace of modern *isms*, modern infidelity, anarchy, and military despotism.... In America, the Revolution placed all churches on the political Calvinistic platform, for it freed them all equally from a political head.... The result has been that all Northern churches have exhibited anarchical and schismatic tendencies, while all Southern

churches have become eminently conservative, kind, and respectful to each other."

Although this claim misrepresented many Northern movements, which were often Protestant without being specifically Calvinistic, it accurately described the Christian Abolitionism promoted by Jonathan Edwards, Jr., and by the Brown family. The Revolution indeed had freed American churches "equally from a political head," so that Protestants were more able than ever to offer individual versions of Christianity. The version offered by the younger Edwards branded slavery as a violation of both the Bible and American principles. In a typical sermon of 1791, Edwards said, "To hold any man in slavery, is to be every day guilty of robbing him of his liberty, or of *man-stealing*. Fifty years from this time it will be as shameful for a man to hold a slave as to be guilty of common theft or robbery." The fact that Owen Brown's Abolitionism was influenced by a sermon by the younger Edwards shown to him by Hallock establishes that John Brown's Abolitionism was truly in the Puritan Calvinist tradition.

To say John Brown was rooted in New England Puritanism begs the question: Wasn't that also true of many other reformers? What made him different?

While many reformers—including Emerson, Theodore Parker, George Stearns, and Samuel G. Howe, to name some who were close to Brown—had deep Puritan roots, what distinguished Brown was that he *remained* an old-style Puritan. All these reformers had either rejected Calvinism in favor of liberal religion or, in the case of Emerson and Parker, had jettisoned Christianity altogether. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Secret Six member also descended from early New England, noted: "John Brown is almost the only radical abolitionist I have ever known who was not more or less radical in religious matters also. His theology was Puritan, like his practice; and accustomed as we are now to see Puritan doctrines and Puritan virtues separately exhibited, it seems quite strange to behold them combined in one person again."

When he called Brown "almost the only" Puritan Abolitionist he knew, he may have been thinking as well of Wendell Phillips, the dynamic anti-slavery orator who, like Brown, was a devout Calvinist. Notably, Phillips came the closest to Brown, among the antebellum reformers, in the urgency of his demands for full social rights for American blacks. If Brown was the *least* racist white person among the pre-Civil War public figures I've investigated, Phillips was a close second—proof again of the social radicalism generated by Puritanism.

To mention Phillips, however, is to highlight another aspect of Brown's

uniqueness: his lowly background and his humble lifestyle. Phillips, weaned in the Boston Brahmin society, was a Harvard graduate distanced from the blacks he defended. Although he was a reformer in the militant Puritan mold, he was also one of the wealthiest men in Boston, and he occasionally betrayed a patrician attitude.

Brown, in contrast, emerged from generations of plain folk, and for most of his life he straddled the poverty line. Unlike the Boston moguls and Concord philosophers who backed him, he approached social reform not from "above" but from ground level—one is tempted to say dirt level. If he later based his Abolitionism on the Bible's injunction to "suffer with those in bonds as bound with them," it is partly because his democratic sympathies grew from a hardscrabble existence.

It is impossible to review Brown's childhood without feeling that the rigors of his family's Calvinistic faith were matched by the rigors of his daily life. Long before he battled American slavery, he was both toughened and humanized by a grueling pioneer life in ethnically diverse environments.

3

The Pioneer

In 1805 the Browns moved from Connecticut to Hudson, Ohio. The thirty-four-year-old Owen Brown, having struggled as a tanner and farmer in New England, had visited Hudson the year before. He had found the small community there "very harmonious and middling prosperous, and most united in religious sentiments." He bought land in the center of Hudson, deciding it would be a good place to try surveying and perhaps set up his own tannery.

He was following in the tracks of other Connecticut Calvinists who had relocated to Ohio's Western Reserve. Hudson, founded in 1799 by Deacon David Hudson, was by 1805 a frontier township in which twenty-five to thirty families occupied an area of some twenty-five square miles. Whites were a small minority in the region, which consisted mainly of Indian tribes, including the Senecas, the Oneidas, the Chippewas, the Ottawas, the Onondagas, and the Mingoes. Four years before the Brown family came, the Indians had seen the arrival of the Reverend Joseph Badger, a clergyman who traveled some 1,700 miles by horseback to spread Calvinistic Christianity. Other Connecticut settlers followed, and soon the Western Reserve was also known as New Connecticut.

In migrating to Ohio, Owen Brown was repeating the "errand into the wilderness" his Puritan forefathers had attempted when they had first settled New England. Having recently experienced his religious conversion, Owen believed that in New Connecticut he would join a community of saints engaged in winning the American West for the Lord, just as, in his mind, Peter Brown had come on the *Mayflower* to New England to Christianize the New World.

What Owen could not realize was that his own errand into the wilderness, guided by his unusual brand of Christianity featuring respect for

people of all ethnicities, would prepare the way for the pioneering antislavery activities of his oldest son.

The trip west was beset with dangers. In a small ox-drawn wagon train, Owen set out on June 9, 1805, with his thirty-three-year-old wife Ruth and their four children: Ruth, who was seven; John, five; Salmon, three; and the one-year-old Oliver. Along with them were the eleven-year-old Levi Blakeslee, whom they had adopted, and the Connecticut schoolmaster Benjamin Whedon and his kindly wife. Their route took them through southern New York and Pennsylvania to Pittsburgh, where they crossed the Allegheny River and followed the Beaver River to the Mahoning Indian Trail, which led them through Ohio's Western Reserve to Hudson, about twenty-five miles south of Cleveland.

One of John Brown's earliest memories was the grueling forty-eight-day journey, which for him was an endless source of adventure. He later recalled his thrill at trekking through "a wilderness filled with wild beasts, & Indians" and encountering packs of "Rattle Snakes which were very large; & which some of the company generally managed to kill." His father let him help drive the oxen and ride the horses, giving him a sense of accomplishment.

In Hudson the Browns lived in a log house that Owen built. There was only one room, about fourteen-by-sixteen feet, with a small loft—a necessity, since seven people occupied the house. The door hung on wooden hinges and was barred by a rough plank. The iron pots in the fireplace produced little besides cornmeal mush, johnnycakes, and bread. The Browns planted corn the first spring after their arrival, but blackbirds and squirrels ate most of the seeds, and the crop was damaged by an unexpected summer frost. Owen survived by surveying land parcels in the Western Reserve. Soon he had earned enough to buy a better house and start a tannery.

The community of saints he had envisaged took the form of the Ecclesiastical Convention of New Connecticut, a religious group devoted to spreading Calvinism and building Congregational and Presbyterian churches throughout the Western Reserve. From 1805 to 1808, Owen Brown was a delegate to the convention, along with three other leading Hudson citizens, Captain Heman Oviatt, Deacon Stephen Thompson, and Hudson's founder, Deacon David Hudson.

If the Browns were pioneers in their errand into a wilderness, they were also pioneers in forging friendly relations with people of different races. Owen's childhood friendship with the likable African native Sam, along with his Christian Abolitionism, had rid him of racial prejudice. He forbade his family to discriminate against people of color.

Unlike earlier Christian settlers from Columbus through Cortés to William Bradford, the Browns did not let feelings of so-called ethnic or religious superiority poison their view of the natives. For them, Indians were not savage "others" to be conquered but rather fellow humans to be respected.

The Browns were unusual not only among previous explorers but even among their fellow whites in Hudson. Owen would later explain that his kindly attitude toward the natives was not generally shared: "When we came to Ohio the Indians were more numerous than the white People but were very friendly and I believe were a benefit rather than injury there [were] some Persons that seemed disposed to quarrel with the Indians, but I never had."

Owen Brown was a rare instance of a white American completely committed to Christianity but at the same time intent on not forcing his religion or customs on the Indians. Though he had come to Hudson, as he explained, "with a determination to help . . . in the seport of religion and civil Order," he had not come to proselytize or dominate the natives.

To the contrary, he had a mutually beneficial relationship with them. He exchanged meal and bread for the turkey, venison, and fish they brought him. Sometimes they were late in filling their side of the bargain, but they always proved "faithfull to pay their debts." When in 1806 the Cuyahoga Indians were threatened by another tribe, they appealed to Owen, who organized the building of a protective cabin for them. If he wanted to win over the natives to Christianity, his tactic was one of comradeship and example, not violence. When the disruptive War of 1812 resulted in the departure of many of the area's natives, Owen Brown was not happy, as were many of his neighbors. "The Indians," he wrote, "left these parts mostly, and rather against my wishes."

The result of his racial openness was a truly multicultural upbringing for his son John, who mixed freely with the natives in the Hudson area. The rifle-toting natives at first frightened John, but, in his words, he "used to hang about them quite as much as was consistent with good manners; & learned a trifle of their talk." They taught his father how to skin deer, and soon John was wearing buckskin, like the Indians. At six, he would later recall, he "was installed a young Buck Skin"—a reference, perhaps, to a play initiation ceremony into a tribe concocted by his young Indian friends. One poor Indian boy gave him a yellow marble that he treasured. He lost the marble—the cause of great sorrow to him, as was the loss of a bobtail squirrel he had found in the woods and tamed.

Although his parents doubtless approved of John's friendship with the

natives, they must have sometimes worried about his spiritual condition. The boy resisted their Christian teachings and chafed under their harsh discipline. Never would John forget the punishment he received from his mother when he lied about stealing three brass pins from a girl who lived with them. His mother drew a confession from him, and then had him brood over his guilt for a day before giving him "a thorough whipping." His father was quick with the rod, evidently for good reason, since John had a wild streak. He was sent to a schoolhouse in Hudson, but he recalled enjoying it only for "the opportunity it afforded to wrestle, & Snow ball & run & jump & knock off old seedy Wool hats." Such scampish activity was for him "almost the only compensation for the confinement, & restraints of school."

His schooling was intermittent, for his father needed his help at the tannery, where John learned how to make leather from the skins of many kinds of animals, including squirrels, cats, and raccoons. John preferred working hard at home to going to school, though he went often enough to know that he disliked arithmetic. He enjoyed reading after a friend introduced him to some volumes of history. He never bothered to perfect his grammar. When Thoreau said that John Brown would leave a Greek accent falling the wrong way but would right a fallen man, he was being kind. Brown had enough trouble with English punctuation and spelling to worry about Greek. Still, he developed a sinewy writing style forceful enough to elicit high praise from Emerson and Lowell—and especially from Thoreau, who said that Brown's prose, with all its technical errors, defined standard English.

John Brown's courage was visible early on. Although not given to picking fights, he "was *excessively* fond of the *hardest & roughest* kind of plays, & could *never get enough* [of] them." The boys in Hudson formed rival gangs, the "Federalists" and the "Republicans," according to their parents' political views. John's father was a Federalist who opposed Republicans such as Jefferson and Madison because they were slaveholders. Once a play fight turned cruel when the Republican boys pelted John's group, the Federalists, with heavy, wet snowballs that threatened injury. Infuriated, John ran headlong into the Republican gang, scattering it single-handedly.

He needed courage to face the loss of his mother, who died in childbirth on December 9, 1808. Both eight-year-old John and his father were devastated by the loss. Owen, left with six children to care for, including the adopted Levi Blakeslee, didn't let much time pass before he looked for another wife. Within a year, he was married to the twenty-year-old Sallie Root. John, who felt he would never recover from his mother's death, had

trouble accepting his stepmother. He called her "a sensible, intelligent, & on many accounts a very estimable woman" but admitted he "*never adopted her in feeling*." He pined after his mother for years.

By the time John was twelve, the population of Hudson had grown to 202. Sawmills and gristmills had sprung up, and the farms were stocked with swine, sheep, and cows. Doctor's offices, lawyer's offices, saloons, and a few shops bordered the town's dirt streets, which were muddy in the winter and dusty in the summer. Rude log cabins still dominated the area, but Deacon Hudson, the town's founder, had built a white New England-style frame house that signaled the future.

The War of 1812 once again tested the pioneering spirit of the Brown family. Owen Brown became a chief provider of beef and horses for General William Hull's army on the Detroit front. He had to make regular hundred-mile cattle drives northwest around the shore of Lake Erie and up into Michigan to Hull's camp. He often took John along and at least once sent the boy to drive a herd alone on the wilderness trail.

It was during one of these long cattle drives that John Brown had two revelations that would inform the rest of his life. One related to the army. The profanity, disobedience, and mutinous talk of Hull's soldiers appalled him, and he vowed never to serve in the military. As he later recalled, "The effect of what he saw during the war was to so far disgust him with Military affairs that he would neither train, *or drill*, but paid fines; & got along like a Quaker until his age finally has cleared him of Military duty."

His second revelation was that slavery was evil. His parents had prepared him for this discovery by teaching him that the Golden Rule applied to people of all races—a rare notion for American whites of that era. On one trip he befriended a slave boy his own age owned by the family he was lodging with. The boy was intelligent and benevolent. John rankled at the preferential treatment that he, as a white, received from the family. The slave's master praised the twelve-year-old John for his good sense and his ability to travel far from his family, but he maltreated the black boy, beating him with household tools and making him sleep in the cold in rags. John instantly recognized "the wretched, hopeless condition, of *Fatherless & Motherless slave children*: for such children have neither Fathers nor Mothers to protect & provide for them." He would call this incident a main factor in the process that "in the end made him a most *determined Abolitionist*," leading him "to declare, *or swear*: *Eternal war* with Slavery."

These childhood revelations distinguished him from most of his contemporaries. Other white reformers of his day would adopt ardent antislavery positions much later in life than he. For many, it took significant public

events to spark active involvement in the antislavery movement. For Wendell Phillips, the motivating events for such involvement were the 1835 mobbing of William Lloyd Garrison and the 1837 murder of the antislavery editor Elijah Lovejoy. Nathaniel P. Rogers's conversion to Abolitionism was caused by the 1835 lecture tour of the British antislavery reformer George Thompson. For Emerson the touchstone moments were the 1832 emancipation of slaves in the West Indies and the proslavery Compromise of 1850; for Lincoln, the Mexican War and the failure of an emancipation bill in Kentucky; for Thoreau, the Mexican War and the rendition of the fugitive slave Anthony Burns; and so on.

John Brown, too, would be deeply affected by such events. What set him apart was that antislavery passion was rooted in his family background and in his childhood friendship with the pitiable slave boy. From a young age, hatred of slavery flamed in the core of his being.

This early disgust with slavery helps explain the extreme measures he would later take against the institution. The other Abolitionists were, by and large, pacifists, and they would maintain their pacifism, embracing violence against the South only as a last resort. John Brown began as a pacifist in his rejection of the military but would take the unique step of dismissing pacifism when he realized the depth of the South's devotion to slavery. His antislavery convictions overwhelmed his pacifism, because they were not acquired over time: they simmered within him from childhood onward.

Little would have come of these convictions, however, had they not fused with religious fervor. In his early teenage years John Brown wrestled with sin in typically Calvinistic fashion. Helpful around the tannery and gifted with practical intelligence, he impressed his elders, whose flattery led him to think highly of himself. As he would recall, he became "quite full of self-conceit," and, despite a tendency to bashfulness, he admitted to being dictatorial with his peers. He knew that he was ignoring the Bible's warnings against vanity. He also felt guilty because he had grown "quite skeptical" of religion. He was ripe for a conversion.

It came when he was sixteen. Following his parents' example, but at a much earlier age, John Brown made a public profession of faith. Guided by the Reverend Mr. Hanford, in 1816 he announced his repentance and his acceptance of Christ in the small schoolhouse that served as the Hudson Congregational Church. He turned to religious studies. He avidly read the Bible, accepting its "divine authenticity" and aiming to commit its "entire contents" to memory. He also memorized most of the pieces in Isaac Watts's famous hymnal. Intending to pursue his religious studies, at seventeen he set out for the East with his fourteen-year-old brother Salmon and

a family friend, Orson M. Oviatt. They rode horses that they sold when they reached New England.

Their first stop was at the home of his family's mentor, the Reverend Jeremiah Hallock, who advised them to attend a school in Plainfield, Massachusetts, run by a relative, Moses Hallock. By the fall of 1816 the three boys were enrolled in the school. Moses Hallock would recall Brown as a tall, sedate boy devoted to his studies, which included rhetoric, grammar, Latin, and Greek. John had brought with him some large pieces of leather he had tanned at home. One was for resoling his shoes, and another was for other students to pull on. On a dare, Hallock's father boasted he would snap the piece by pulling it with his hands. He struggled mightily but failed; his son long recalled "the very marked yet kind immovableness of [John Brown's] face, on seeing father's defeat."

John remained in this school only a few months, transferring that winter to the Morris Academy in Litchfield, Connecticut. The other two boys followed. The school's director, the Reverend William R. Weeks, and his young assistant, Herman L. Vail, found John to be a serious young man ready to assume a fatherly role with his rambunctious brother Salmon. Once when Salmon committed an infraction, John asked Vail if he planned to punish the boy, saying that their father would if they were at home and announcing his intention to do so if Vail refused. When Vail demurred, John flogged Salmon.

Wishing to devote his life to religion, John aimed to train for the ministry. Decades later Vail would remind him of the Morris Academy years, "and how we had religious meetings for religious conferences and prayers, in which your own voice was so often heard." John hoped to receive his divinity training at Amherst College. Funds were running short, however, and an eye inflammation interfered with his studies. By the summer of 1817, he had returned to Ohio, having reluctantly abandoned his ministerial plans.

He resumed his work at his father's tannery but before long decided to go into business for himself. With his adopted brother Levi Blakeslee he started a tannery about a mile northwest of the center of Hudson, on the road toward Cleveland. They built a barn where they soaked, dried, and cured leather. Nearby they erected a cabin where they kept what they called a "Bachelor's Hall," with John doing the cooking and baking.

John Brown at eighteen was a lean man of five feet ten inches, with dark hair brushed straight back and a chiseled face whose determined look was accented by hollow cheeks, a sharp jaw, and glittering gray-blue eyes. Plain in dress, he was fastidiously neat. By reading the lives of what he called

"great, wise & good men," he had grown to dislike "vain & frivolous" conversation and people. Purposeful and tenacious, he liked establishing plans and sticking to them, confident of success.

Success, however, would rarely come, at least in the financial sense. Although he had good instincts as a tanner and later as a surveyor, farmer, and wool dealer, he lacked the tact and flexibility it took to succeed in business. Also, like many other aspiring businessmen, he would be buffeted by the financial panics that periodically struck the American economy before the Civil War.

He might have avoided financial distress had he heeded the experience of his father. Owen Brown had put himself in a precarious position by buying large land parcels on speculation. Between 1819 and 1823 the first great economic depression of the nineteenth century came and nearly wiped him out. "Money became scarce," he recalled, "property fell, and that which I thought well bought would not bring its cost." His bad timing in business would rub off on his son, but so would his stoical acceptance of failure. Owen conceded that the economic panic had left him "a heavy loser" but turned to religion for solace: "I can say the loss or gain of property in a short time appears but of little consequence, they are momentary things, and will look very small in eternity. Job left us a good example."

If the father and son were not destined to be pioneers of capitalism, they did become unwitting pioneers of American race relations. Without an awareness of doing anything extraordinary, believing they were simply practicing Christianity—even though most American Christians would have considered their tolerant racial attitudes heretical—they risked their reputations and even their lives to defend oppressed slaves.

Their first known test came in 1817, a significant year because it also saw the founding of the first large antislavery organization, the American Colonization Society. Colonizationists argued that slaves should be emancipated and deported to Africa or elsewhere, since equal rights were impossible for blacks to achieve in the United States. Although little came of the movement other than sending a number of boatloads of blacks to Liberia, colonization had a surprisingly wide impact on American culture. Jefferson was an ardent colonizationist, as were Henry Clay, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Abraham Lincoln, to name a few. Colonization also engendered William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society, which arose in protest against the colonization scheme, considering it racist and impractical.

Owen and John Brown were worlds apart from the colonizationists in their view of slavery. For them, blacks were not inferior beings to be excluded from America; instead, they were equals to be integrated into

white society. As will be seen, John Brown would often welcome blacks into his home. His first step in this direction came shortly after his return from the East, when a fugitive slave approached him and Levi Blakeslee, begging for help in evading a band of white pursuers. While Blakeslee went to town for supplies, Brown took the fugitive into his cabin. When the sound of approaching horses was heard, he told the black man to flee through a window and hide in the brush. The sounds turned out to be neighbors returning to town. Brown went to retrieve the fugitive, whom he found cowering behind a log. Like the incident of the maltreated slave boy, this one led Brown to vow "eternal enmity to slavery."

For the next two decades, this kind of direct aid to individual blacks would be John Brown's chosen method of combating slavery. Hudson was a popular station on the Underground Railroad, that network of secret links facilitating the flight of black fugitive slaves from the South to the far North or Canada. Owen and John Brown were active workers for the Underground Railroad, ready at all times to hide fugitives and help them on their way north.

As important as antislavery activity was to John Brown, at this point it was not a deliberate program but something he did unself-consciously and instinctively, like breathing. It was part of his other daily activities. In his late teens, he was mainly concerned with running his tannery. He also eyed work as a land surveyor. Using Abel Flint's *System of Geometry and Trigonometry Together with a Treatise on Surveying*, he struggled to decipher the tangents, logarithms, and scientific tables needed to master surveyor's instruments.

By early 1820 his duties at the tannery necessitated his use of a housekeeper for chores around the cabin. He took in a widow from the New England hood, Mrs. Amos Lusk, who, like him, was descended from the New England Puritans. Helping her with the housekeeping duties was her nineteen-year-old daughter Dianthe, a short, plain woman of deep piety who loved singing hymns and praying alone in the woods. Although humorless, she was pleasant and disarmingly candid. John Brown, encouraged by his father and attracted by Dianthe's quiet virtue, engaged in a brief courtship that resulted in their marriage on June 21, 1820, probably in Hudson's new Congregational meetinghouse, which had been dedicated that March.

Until her death after childbirth on August 10, 1832, Dianthe would be a guiding presence in John Brown's life. He later recalled her as a "neat industrious & economical girl; of excellent character; earnest piety; & good practical common sense" who through mild admonitions "maintained a most powerful, & good influence" over him. She bore seven children, five

of whom—John Jr., Jason, Owen, Ruth, and Frederick—would survive to adulthood.

Despite Brown's fond recollections of Dianthe, their marriage was not problem-free. Her family had a history of mental illness; two of her sisters supposedly showed symptoms of it. Although Dianthe was stable through much of her marriage, she reportedly exhibited some derangement, especially toward the end. Her two oldest sons, John and Frederick, would also have bouts of "insanity." These mental problems, along with apparent aberrations among others of John Brown's extended family, including some of his blood relatives, would be brought up at Brown's 1859 trial as a last-minute gesture toward an insanity defense. Brown rejected the tactic vigorously, insisting he was not insane.

In light of everything I've read by and about him, I believe him. His wife's condition remains unclear. John Jr.'s problems were intermittent. Frederick, as Brown himself admitted, was the most consistently disturbed of the immediate family—though even he enjoyed long periods of normalcy. But I cannot categorize John Brown as insane, as some have done.

Insanity, a fuzzy term anyway, was particularly so in an era when phenology with its bump-reading and brain "organs" was accepted as high science, and when "monomania" was a catchall word for any dogged behavior out of the ordinary. At the very least, it is impossible, given the evidence, to brand Brown as insane simply on the basis of the fact that some of his relatives had symptoms of what was then called insanity.

More relevant to Brown's later development than his wife's mental state was a difficulty that arose in his relationship with her brother, Milton Lusk. Milton was very close to Dianthe, calling her "my guiding star, my guardian angel," and saying she sang to him beautifully and sometimes took him to pray with her in the woods. When she became John Brown's housekeeper, he tried to visit her Sundays, his day off. John Brown, a firm believer in the holiness of the Sabbath, refused the Sunday visits. Milton became enraged and declared, "John, I won't come Sunday or any other day." An open quarrel ensued, and Milton declined to attend his sister's wedding.

What makes this squabble significant is Brown's utter insistence on the sanctity of the Sabbath. He was willing to risk upsetting his beloved Dianthe in order to adhere to his belief in the Sabbath. Although strict sabbatarianism was not rare among nineteenth-century Americans, Brown would twice prove himself unique—on May 25, 1856, at Pottawatomie and on October 16, 1859, at Harpers Ferry—when he chose Sundays to carry out his violent campaigns against slavery.

In other words, he could refuse Sunday visits, but he could commit mur-

der on Sunday. The apparent paradox resulted from the fact that his passionate sabbatarianism eventually fused with his antislavery zeal. He chose Sunday in order to put an exclamation point on his holy war against slavery. On the Sunday he began the Harpers Ferry raid, he woke his men early and called them to worship to pray for success in their effort to topple slavery.

Back in June 1820, however, the newly wed John Brown was thinking not of antislavery battles but of starting a family and succeeding in business. He could not foresee how large his family would grow or how often death would visit his household.

Least of all could he anticipate how his antislavery battles would consume his life and would spark the bloodiest war in American history.