Brown, John (9 May 1800-2 Dec. 1859), abolitionist, also known as Old Brown of Osawatomie, was born in Torrington, Connecticut, the son of Owen Brown, a tanner and farmer, and Ruth Mills. Brown believed that the American republic was to be God's instrument for the return of Christ to earth and that, as the "embodiment of all that is evil," slavery alone stood in the way. That millennial vision was a legacy of Brown's formative years in Hudson, Ohio, as the first surviving son of pious "Squire" Brown, an early settler, prominent landowner, and zealous reformer. The father of sixteen children by two wives, Owen Brown claimed descent from Peter Browne of the *Mayflower* company, a claim (now believed doubtful) that John Brown exploited in seeking financial contributions for the cause of antislavery among New Englanders who revered the "Pilgrim Fathers."

His father was a lifelong mentor to John Brown and inculcated in him a stern sense of piety and civic duty. John had little formal schooling, but his father exposed him to books, especially the Bible, the conversation of business and church leaders, and antislavery newspapers, which Brown read assiduously. The death of Brown's mother when he was eight and his inability to bond with his stepmother strengthened his father's influence over him. Brown's failure to finish a course of study at an eastern academy intended to prepare him for the ministry disappointed his father, but Brown returned to Hudson to become, by his own account, an "imperious" foreman at his father's tannery. Although remembered for the restlessness of his later years, Brown did not move from Hudson until he was twenty-five and himself a father of three.

Like his father, John Brown reared two families. Prospering as a tanner, in 1820 he married nineteen-year-old Dianthe Lusk, the daughter of his widowed housekeeper. In twelve years of marriage she bore him seven children, five of whom reached adulthood, and supported Brown's struggle against slavery. She died in 1832 after giving birth to a stillborn son.

The following year Brown married Mary Ann Day, the daughter of a blacksmith from New York. At sixteen she was just half his age and wholly uneducated. Mary was a large, strong, shy woman who bore in silence the many hardships Brown's devotion to the cause imposed on her. Only six of her thirteen children survived childhood. Although she shared Brown's evangelical faith and antislavery convictions, Mary quietly opposed her sons' going to Kansas and Harpers Ferry. In the summer of 1864 Mary, her three girls, and her surviving son, Salmon, went by wagon to California, where Mary supported herself as a practical nurse in Red Bluff. She died in San Francisco in 1884.

Brown's long struggle to provide for his growing family and gain respect in the community at first bore fruit. Lured to the new settlement of Richmond in Crawford County, Pennsylvania, in 1825 he opened a successful tannery, won appointment under [John Quincy Adams] as postmaster, joined the Masons, established a school in his home, and founded a Congregational church. Ten years later, his tannery faltering, Brown entered into partnership in a tanning business in Franklin Mills (now Kent), Ohio. Borrowing from business acquaintances, Brown secured a contract to build a canal from Franklin Mills to Akron, purchased a 700-acre farm for development as an addition to the town, and formed the Franklin Land Company with other locally prominent men. During the hard times that followed the panic of 1837, Brown and his father lost heavily, and Brown was never able to pay off all his accumulated debts, facing legal judgments against him. Finally, in 1842, Brown went through bankruptcy and the court took most of his few possessions.

But in 1844 Brown's fortunes changed. He was raising Saxony sheep in Richfield, Ohio, when a wealthy Akron businessman, Colonel Simon Perkins, rescued him from obscurity by entering a partnership with Brown to market wool. The business grew for a time, and Brown soon gained a reputation among Ohio growers for his crusade to force northeastern buyers to pay higher prices for better grades of wool. In 1847 he even moved his family to Springfield, Massachusetts, where the firm was headquartered. To recoup the firm's mounting losses, Brown in 1849 took 200,000 pounds of wool to Britain, where he hoped to outflank New England buyers. Although the trip proved financially ruinous, Brown seized the opportunity to meet British abolitionists and study military fortifications and guerrilla tactics on the Continent. Soon after, the firm of Perkins and Brown collapsed under an avalanche of lawsuits resulting chiefly from Brown's mismanagement. But Perkins cast no blame on Brown for his losses and in 1854, the civil suits finally disposed of, the two men parted as friends. At age fifty-four Brown possessed only a few head of cattle in Ohio and title to an unpaid 244-acre farm in North Elba in upstate New York.

The origins of Brown's war against slavery are disputed. Brown and his defenders claimed that he nurtured a lifelong dedication to the cause. In a letter written to the thirteen-year-old son of one of his financial supporters in 1857, Brown declared that he had sworn "*Eternal war* with Slavery" at about age twelve after seeing a slave boy beaten with a shovel. Later experiences inspired renewed vows. Long after his death, three of Brown's aging sons, beleaguered by criticisms of the family's past "fanaticism," claimed that as early as perhaps 1836 or 1839 their father had led them in a sacred family

oath to "make war on slavery," but no contemporary evidence of this incident survives. Brown's letters during this period betray no plans to attack slavery by force of arms.

Critics have favored a later origin and a less conventional explanation for Brown's antislavery. Allan Nevins argued in *The Emergence of Lincoln* (1950) that a "peculiarly hard, failure-ridden life" drove Brown to take refuge from himself "in fighting the wrongs of others." But this oft-repeated thesis fails to account for Brown's first documented efforts to help "those in bondage," which he undertook in November 1834 as "prospects about business [were] rather brightening." At the time Brown planned to raise a "negro boy or youth" as one of his own sons. He believed that if Christians would only educate young blacks to become self-sufficient, slaveholders would be "constitutionally driven" toward emancipation. Planning to found a school for black children, Brown urged his brother Frederick to move to Richmond with some "firstrate abolitionist families" to create a safe environment for it. Brown then lived in the "confident expectation" that God would soon end slavery.

But events farther from home prodded Brown to adopt a more militant stance. When a mob in Alton, Illinois, killed abolitionist printer Elijah Lovejoy in 1837, Brown followed his father's example in publicly pledging his life to opposing slavery. In 1846, while he was a wool merchant in bustling Springfield, Brown met leading reformers and aided fugitive slaves. Perhaps influenced by black militants like Henry Highland Garnet and David Walker, Brown embraced "forcible means," and in 1847 he confided to Frederick Douglass a sweeping plan to attack slavery in guerrilla raids from Allegheny Mountain hideaways throughout the South and send slaves north on a "Subterranean Pass Way."

Brown's growing sense of stewardship toward African Americans led him in 1848 to publish a satirical essay called "Sambo's Mistakes" in the *Ram's Horn*, an obscure, black-owned New York abolitionist newspaper. In that article he chided blacks for self-indulgence, submissiveness, and failure to support one another in the face of "brutal aggressions." In response to the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, Brown in 1851 recruited Springfield blacks into a secret society he named the League of Gileadites. He urged members to arm themselves to prevent the arrest of suspected fugitives and to "make clean work with your enemies."

With the dissolution of his partnership with Perkins in 1854, Brown determined to devote his remaining years to the "service" of blacks. Now grown to manhood, five of his sons had left drought-plagued Ohio to take up homesteads in the newly opened Kansas Territory. But Brown decided to return to the North Elba farm he had acquired from the reformer Gerrit Smith, hoping to be a "kind of father" to a colony of blacks learning to farm on neighboring properties. Soon after reaching his farm, however, Brown received an appeal from his pioneer sons for weapons to protect themselves from Missouri "Border Ruffians." Brown interpreted the letter as a religious call. "I think could I hope in any other way to answer the end of my being," he wrote to Mary in September 1855 as he hurried with a wagonload of rifles and swords to Kansas, "I would be quite content to be at North Elba." Brown expected to return home in a short time and did not go to Kansas either to "stir the waters" or to free slaves, but simply to help his sons survive against human and natural adversaries.

After the bloodless Wakarusa War in December 1855 during which free-state leaders at Lawrence named him captain of a short-lived militia company, Brown believed for some months that Kansas had been won for freedom. When a proslavery force "sacked" Lawrence the following spring, he determined to act. Brown had long been angered by the failure of the proslavery territorial courts to prosecute the accused killers of five free-state men. He feared an attack from proslavery settlers on Pottawatomie Creek who had burned out a free-state storekeeper and threatened Brown's neighbors. Brown accompanied a militia company led by his son John, Jr., to the relief of Lawrence, but when the unit arrived too late, Brown persuaded a small party to return with him to the Pottawatomie.

On the night of 24 May 1856 Brown descended on the cabins of his victims in what his sons later defended as a "retaliatory blow" against the proslavery party. Dragooning five men from their beds, Brown's party butchered them with short, heavy cavalry broadswords. When the party failed to locate other intended victims, Brown's men "confiscated" horses and disappeared into the night. Although a meeting at Osawatomie near the Brown claims condemned the "massacre," a large proslavery "posse" easily dispersed Brown's men and burned the town on 30 August in retaliation for the killings. Intended to create a "restraining fear" among proslavery men generally, the Pottawatomie killings anticipated the terrorism of a later era.

His role in the killings still unknown in the East, Brown raised money from reformers for the defense of Kansas. For many months he led a guerrilla band in skirmishes with rival guerrillas, and he joined with Captain James Montgomery in a

free-state offensive along the Kansas-Missouri border. In December 1858, with peace restored, Brown led a raid into Missouri, where his men seized eleven slaves and several horses and killed a slaveowner in the process. With a price on his head, Brown boldly transported the blacks by wagon and railroad boxcar to freedom in Canada.

Even before peace had settled over Kansas, Brown had revived his plan to attack slavery in the southern states. In May 1858 he organized a secret constitutional convention among blacks in Chatham, Ontario, which adopted Brown's Provisional Constitution for the government of a temporary black state and declared slavery to be "a most barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable war" upon an oppressed people. Supported by contributions from a committee of reformers later dubbed the Secret Six, Brown gathered a force of twenty-one volunteers at a farmhouse on the Antietam Road across the Potomac River from Harpers Ferry.

On Sunday night, 16 October 1859, Brown's men crossed into Virginia and seized the federal arsenal, the armory yard, and other strategic points. Sending parties into the countryside, Brown gathered hostages and slaves from nearby plantations. He arrested employees of the arsenal as they arrived for work Monday morning, but he unaccountably did not thereafter withdraw across the Shenandoah Bridge to the relative safety of Loudoun Heights. That afternoon local militia companies captured both bridges and forced Brown's men to retreat into a small fire engine house in the armory yard. At dawn on Tuesday a storming party of U.S. Marines from Washington commanded by army colonel Robert E. Lee battered in the engine house door, bayoneted two of Brown's volunteers, and captured Brown himself. Ten of Brown's men were killed, including his sons Watson and Oliver and two young in-laws, seven were eventually captured, and five managed to make their way through the mountains to safety in the North. Two slaves, who seem to have sided with Brown, died during or soon after the raid. Brown's men killed three residents of Harpers Ferry, a local slaveowner, and a marine. Brown's saber wounds proving superficial, he promptly determined to wield the "sword of the spirit" on behalf of God's cause. He declared he was ready to "mingle my blood further with the blood of . . . millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments."

During his trial Brown spurned efforts by friends and relatives to win him a commutation of sentence on grounds of insanity. The petitioners cited evidence of insanity in his mother's family (though not, as often claimed, in his mother herself). Although the affidavits attesting to Brown's alleged "monomania" benefited from hindsight, it was true that Brown exhibited "agitation" or outrage toward any tolerance of slavery. As Virginia governor Henry Wise insisted, however, Brown had been rational and composed during the raid. But Brown's moods did vary markedly. After Harpers Ferry, he seemed elated and grandiose despite his failure to free any slaves and the deaths of two of his sons. At other times Brown confessed himself profoundly discouraged. Yet his moods were not cyclical or disabling and his bouts of depression were linked to bereavements and disappointments. He was apparently never clinically depressed. His claim that he was an instrument of God to free the slaves seemed to some delusional, but as a prisoner he acknowledged the hubris of that claim. If his judgment was deeply flawed, Brown was neither legally insane nor manifestly psychotic. Facing execution, an unrepentant Brown prophesied that "the crimes of this *guilty, land: will* never be purged *away*; but with Blood." On the scaffold, surrounded by hundreds of Virginia militiamen, Brown met death like a soldier, perfecting his martyrdom.

Though a military fiasco, Brown's raid was for many a jeremiad against a nation that defied God in tolerating human bondage. It sent tremors of horror throughout the South and gave secessionists a persuasive symbol of northern hostility. It hardened positions over slavery everywhere. It helped to discredit Stephen A. Douglas's compromise policy of popular sovereignty and to divide the Democratic party, thus ensuring the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. In a longer view, African Americans especially have seen in Brown hope for the eventual redemption of an oppressive America, while critics have condemned his extremism and deplored his divisive impact on the sectional crisis. Both Brown's fanaticism and his passion for freedom make him an enduring icon.

Bibliography

Brown's letters and papers are scattered in more than a dozen major collections across the United States. The most important are the Boyd B. Stutler Collection at the West Virginia Department of Culture and History in Charles Town; the Henry A. Wise Collection and others at the Library of Congress; the John Brown, Richard J. Hinton, and other collections

at the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka; the Oswald Garrison Villard Collection at Columbia University; the Ferdinand J. Dreer Collection at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; the Clarence S. Gee Collection at the Hudson Library and Historical Society in Hudson, Ohio; the John Brown, Jr., Papers at the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus; and the James W. Eldridge and Horatio N. Rust collections at the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, Calif. The Richard O. Boyer Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society include copies of documents from many of the above, and the Stutler and John Brown, Jr., collections are available on microfilm.

Brown's antislavery career spawned rival biographical legacies. A celebratory abolitionist tradition culminated in Oswald Garrison Villard's still valuable *John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (1910), which is based in part on interviews with surviving Brown relations and acquaintances. W. E. B. Du Bois's *John Brown* (1909) is an insightful tribute by a distinguished black scholar. Where these authors see heroism, Brown's detractors see criminality or moral failure. The youthful Robert Penn Warren's critical *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929) relies on secondary sources, but James C. Malin's research for his influential debunking *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six* (1942) is exhaustive. Joseph Chamberlain Furnas's *The Road to Harpers Ferry* (1959) sees growing mental instability in Brown.

In the early 1970s several scholarly biographies bridged the moral issues with varying success. Stephen B. Oates's *To Purge This Land with Blood* (1970) is reliable and even-handed but cautious. Jules Abels's lively *Man on Fire: John Brown and the Cause of Liberty* (1971) is sympathetic but less thoroughly researched. Richard O. Boyer's admiring *The Legend of John Brown* (1973) puts Brown's life before he went to Kansas into the context of his times. Benjamin Quarles's *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown* (1974) adds valuable information, and Jeffery Rossbach's *Ambivalent Conspirators: John Brown, the Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence* (1982) clarifies why leading reformers like Samuel Gridley Howe and Theodore Parker supported Brown's war against slavery. Paul Finkelman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On* (1995), reassesses Brown's impact on the sectional crisis.

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