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A More Perfect Union: Year Two
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Stephen B. Oates
To Purge This Land with Blood

John Brown has been a figure that has long mystified historians. He is arguably one of the most paradoxical figures in American history: a man who justified murder through the teachings of the Bible. The problem for too many years has been that books written about Brown have evolved from two distinct interpretations of the man. John Brown was exclusively either a hero to be lionized through writing or a mad man to be lamented. In Stephen Oates' To Purge This Land with Blood, Brown's life is objectively documented. The reader comes away from the book understanding why Brown is both hero *and* mad man.

In his prologue, Oates states that his chief objective is for the reader to understand John Brown. For too long, academics and popular authors alike have simply continued to take a polarized view of John Brown, a view that Brown was either, "...right or wrong, hero or villain, saint or madman."¹ Oates avoids this characterization and instead offers a balanced view of the "old man," as he was referred to throughout the book. Not only does Oates objectively analyze the life of John Brown, but he does it while still capturing the readers' attention and curiosity.

The book title itself is unique, in that, it rises above those titles simply naming or praising the figure; it uses Brown's own words to reflect the core of his ideology without placing any qualifying language on his tactics. When boarding a wagon on the way to his hanging in Charlestown, Virginia on December 2, 1859, sitting atop the very coffin he was to be buried in

¹ Oates, vii

(Brown was later placed in a free soil coffin en route to his final resting place in North Elba, New York) Brown handed over a note to one of the soldiers escorting him to the gallows. In the note Brown prophesized the Civil War, “I, John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty, land: will never be purged away; but with Blood. I had as I now think: vainly flattered myself that without bloodshed it might be done.”² I found the title to be an incredible selection, one that truly captures Brown’s convictions.

When reading a history book, I do so with dual purpose. First and foremost, I am simply a reader looking for accuracy, objectivity and emotion. My second purpose is classroom adaptation. Can I take what I have learned and adapt it to my classroom in some way? I hope to either strengthen my students’ knowledge of the content or be able to recount a scene from the book that will capture the attention of my audience. In this case, both as a reader of history and a teacher, this book exceeded my expectations.

Oates begins this biography appropriately by recounting Brown’s youth, with special attention paid to his family’s ancestry and religious upbringing. Brown was raised as a strict Calvinist and taught religion through the Old Testament. To the Brown’s, God was very much captured in Jonathan Edwards famous “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” God was to be feared and wrongdoings were to be punished. The religious convictions that Brown inherited from his parents are crucial in understanding John Brown. After all, Brown’s actions in Kansas and later at Harper’s Ferry were justified through his religious beliefs.

Brown’s anti-slavery views were similarly solidified during his youth. His father had spoken to him about the evils of slavery, but it was not until he witnessed the horrors of slavery first hand that his opinion was truly his own and not an inherited opinion. Brown recounted this incident later in life, remembering that he

² Oates, 351

...had just completed one of his cattle drives and took lodging with a landlord who owned a slave about John's age. Observing that the negro was 'badly clothed' and 'poorly fed,' John felt sorry for him. But contrition turned to horror when the master, right in front of John, beat the negro boy with an iron fire shovel...He insisted later—and there seems no reason to dispute him—that the beating he witnessed made him a most determined foe of slavery from then on.³

This was undoubtedly a seminal moment on Brown's path toward militant abolitionism. This moment was something I was previously unaware of, and something that I would share with my students in teaching them about Brown's ability to empathize with slaves.

Oates focuses a great deal on Brown's relationship with his children, twenty altogether by two wives. Brown was a loving, but strict parent. One of his sons, John Jr., required such frequent whippings that his father made him keep an account for punishment due, "For disobeying Mother, 8 lashes...unfaithfulness at work, 3 lashes...telling a lie, 8 lashes."⁴ John Jr. remembered that on one particular occasion after paying one third of his debt, his father "...stripped off his shirt, sank to his knees, gave his son the whip and ordered him to 'lay it on.'"⁵ Brown went on to incur the remaining two thirds of the account balance, blood dripping from his naked back. Brown imposed strict rules and punishments on his children, rules which he clearly did not exempt himself from.

Brown's early adulthood proved difficult to follow. I do not attribute this to the author's research or writing, but simply because the period of Brown's life was turbulent. He worked a myriad of professions in a number of locations. Brown's vocations ranged from leather tanner to sheep shearer. He worked all throughout the free states: Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts and Connecticut, never staying very long in either a profession or a community.

³ Oates, p: 12

⁴ Oates, p:24

⁵ Oates, p:24

Brown was restless and Oates captures this well. The bulk of the book, however, focuses on Brown's role in Bleeding Kansas and his attempt to raid a federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry.

Oates is right to focus on the events of Bleeding Kansas and Harper's Ferry as they were the events that made Brown famous. Oates succeeds, however, where so many historians have failed, as he objectively portrays Brown as he was. John Brown in American society was two different people to two different places. One begins to realize the role that the press had in all of this in reading To Purge This Land with Blood. Oates carefully lays out accounts of Pottawatomie and Harper's Ferry from Southern press as well as Northern newspapers. These accounts are brilliant and could certainly be applied in the classroom to allow students to make contemporary connections. Students can apply the newspaper accounts of Brown's actions to modern day media's analysis of the Obama administration. The newspapers sought to add fuel to the flames in Kansas. One example can be found in the wake of the Pottawatomie Massacre in the pro-slavery Westport *Border Times* which reported, "WAR! WAR! Eight pro-slavery men murdered by the abolitionists in Franklin County."⁶

Another interesting aspect of Pottawatomie was Brown's justification. How did this deeply religious man justify his actions? First, he never accepted that he killed the men that night, but rather, he approved of it (this does appear to be true according to Oates). Brown asserted: "I believe that I did God service in having them killed."⁷ There is no doubting Brown's sincerity in his belief that he committed these crimes in accordance with God's will. This ability to excuse his actions gave Brown a moral blank check. He gave himself permission to commit acts of violence, so long as it was for the cause. Oates tackles this logic:

Brown was now totally and irrevocably at war with the Slave Power in Kansas. And because in his own mind this was a holy war, waged in the name of God

⁶ Oates, p: 142

⁷ Oates, p: 147

against obstinately wicked men, Brown could justify many acts for the good of the cause: midnight assassination, distortion and secrecy, lies, terrorization, plundering and horse stealing. To the victor belonged the spoils anyway, for as God commanded Moses, as related in the Book of Deuteronomy: “But the women, and the little ones, and the cattle, and all that is in the city, even all the spoil thereof, shalt thou take unto thyself; and thou shalt eat the spoil of thine enemies, which the Lord they God hath given to thee.”⁸

This is a good example of how Oates presents Brown to the reader as he believed he truly was. It is impossible to understand the actions of Brown without understanding his Old Testament convictions. Brown cannot be separated from his religious motivations and Oates brings that point to the forefront throughout the biography.

After the Pottawatomie Massacre, Brown was an outlaw. He managed to find safety in a number of sympathetic northern cities, especially Boston. Brown spent considerable time in Boston networking among wealthy abolitionists and fundraising for his future exploits. Brown, however, resented giving speeches for money because he felt as though he were begging. Despite his reservations, Brown was able to raise the money and munitions necessary, much of which came from the “Secret Six,” a group of wealthy abolitionists that provided the majority of Brown’s funding.

After carefully tracing Brown’s steps from Kansas throughout the Northeast and eventually down into the enemy territory of Maryland and Virginia (modern day West Virginia), Oates appropriately questions Brown’s decision to raid Harper’s Ferry. The first question that comes to mind is did Brown genuinely feel he could be successful, or was he preparing for an act of martyrdom. Brown failed at Harper’s Ferry. His plans fell apart, the Virginia state militia descended upon him and not a single slave joined his uprising. Oates raises appropriate questions about Brown’s strategy. For example, how would the slaves know there was an uprising? How would they know how to get to Harper’s Ferry? There were a number of flaws in his plan. One

⁸ Oates, p: 155

begins to realize, however, that Brown entered into Harper's Ferry with what appears to be a win-win outlook. Either he succeeded in igniting a slave uprising throughout the South, or he died a martyr in hopes of pushing the country towards a war over slavery, which he believed would bring about its ultimate extinction.

Brown survived Harper's Ferry and in the days and weeks following his capture, a hero was born, at least to the Northern press. Brown was allowed to write letters and speak with members of the press. He did a brilliant job of manipulating the media to present the image of John Brown the martyr to the North. The trial was held in Charlestown, Virginia as Harper's Ferry was deemed unsafe for Brown and also perhaps, too vulnerable to an attempt to free him from his cell. Brown understood that he had no chance of obtaining an innocent verdict and was appalled at his attorney's desire to claim insanity. On the final day of his trial, Brown was declared guilty after a mere 45 minute deliberation by the jury. Following being sentenced to death, Brown was allowed to make a statement. He gave a brilliant impromptu speech pointing out the court's Bible and how Brown's actions were consistent with its teachings. He concluded his speech by saying: "Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say let it be done."⁹ It was an impressive speech that won Brown tremendous support and sympathy from the North.

In the little over a month between Brown's sentencing and eventual hanging, the issue of his sanity was discussed at great length. His lawyers pleaded with him to consider, but Brown would not, rightfully noting that, "I am worth inconceivably more to hang than for any other

⁹ Oates, p: 327

purpose.”¹⁰ Finally, on December 2, 1859 Brown was brought to the gallows and hanged.

Brown’s death and the varying response of the North and the South show us a great deal in the years leading up to the Civil War. Brown may not have sparked a Civil War, but he certainly sped up the process.

In closing, Oates’ objectivity is impressive. One comes away understanding how Brown was viewed in the slave states and free states. Oates consistently brings Brown’s faith into the biography which is perhaps the most important aspect to understand when analyzing his actions. Perhaps the best component of the book, however, was Oates’ ability to bring the perspective of different news media into the book. We can learn a great deal about the decade building up to the Civil War by simply reading the newspaper accounts of John Brown’s actions. We learn that the gulf between North and South widened immensely, which is captured brilliantly through accounts written of John Brown. I enjoyed the book a great deal and look forward to using excerpts in my classroom.

¹⁰ Oates, p: 335

Work Cited

Oates, Stephen B. *To Purge This Land with Blood: a Biography of John Brown*. Amherst: University of Mass., 1984.