

Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid That Sparked the Civil War

Robert E. McGlone

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

McGlone, Robert E. (2012) "Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid That Sparked the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.4.15

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss4/14>

Review

McGlone, Robert E.

Fall 2012

Horwitz, Tony *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid That Sparked the Civil War*. Henry Holt and Company, \$18.00 ISBN 978-0-8050-9153-3

Elevating John Brown's Importance to Civil War History

Tony Horwitz's *Midnight Rising* is the latest of a dozen scholarly books about Old John Brown to appear since 2000. A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and travel writer, Horwitz has journeyed across the South to trace the impact of the Civil War on the contemporary United States in *Confederates in the Attick*. Now, in his retelling of the story of the Harpers Ferry raid, he has exploited the principal manuscript collections on Brown and his cohorts and a wealth of contemporary printed sources in an attempt to evoke the sense of crisis Brown's ill-fated "insurrection" created North and South. Horwitz's eye for telling detail, his evocative imagery, and his lively style make *Midnight Rising* a terrific read.

He argues that Harper's Ferry "wasn't simply a prelude to secession and civil war.... it was a dress rehearsal" (5). It compelled people to identify themselves as for or against Brown and his cause, thus deepening sectional divisions. Horwitz sees the northern response to John Brown's "beatification" as hardening into convictions southern suspicions that the North was abolitionist at heart and that its leaders could not be trusted to honor the constitutional protections guaranteed slavery (261). Horwitz's Brown is deeply flawed. Like many early Brown biographers, he claims "fixedness" and a "chronic inability to manage funds," "grandiosity" and "poor judgment" sabotaged Brown's early careers as a land developer and wool merchant (29, 66).

But Horwitz does not buy into the discredited view that Brown took refuge from his personal failures in championing the cause of the slave—that his hatred of slavery was compensatory or neurotic. He does assert that Brown hoped to "redeem all the tribulations of his difficult career, most particularly the failure at Harpers Ferry" and the deaths of two sons there by "dying well" (216). Briefly

he raises de novo the tired question whether Brown may have suffered from bipolar disorder, and he makes much of Brown's assertion that he believed himself to be God's "instrument" to free the slaves. But he also recognizes that Brown was a racial egalitarian in an age when even abolitionists did not always champion integration or welcome intimacy with blacks. He concludes that Brown's "ardor in the cause of racial justice was a powerful source of his ability to inspire others" (113).

Horwitz recognizes that in the Kansas border war Brown gained a sense of vocation as a "guerrilla warrior." But he dismisses Brown's "military thinking" in seizing Harpers Ferry as idiosyncratic and deeply flawed. Once his adversaries occupied residences overlooking the "lower town" where the U. S. armory and arsenal were located, Brown's men would have been in a "virtual shooting gallery," Horwitz observes. He does not explain why Brown failed to withdraw from the town with his hostages and handful of freed slaves in the early hours of the raid, given the exposure of his small force. He ponders why Brown, who had hitherto taken great care to protect confidences, left a trunk full of incriminating correspondence with supporters and other material for Maryland authorities to find at the rented farm where he had assembled his men and arms. Horwitz has fleshed out the story of the raid, in part, by expanding on the roles of Brown's loyal boys among others. His orchestration of data from ancillary sources is impressive.

But he has been less critical than he might have been in using some of the key documents in the Brown story. For example, he does not question the authenticity of the contested story of the sacred family oath to fight slavery to which Brown ostensibly had his children swear. In summarizing the final moments of the Harpers Ferry raid, Horwitz relies chiefly on Lieutenant Israel Green's 1885 article in the *North American Review* telling of his heroic capture of Brown in the fire engine house on the armory grounds. Horwitz says nothing about Brown's conflicting claims to have joined those of his men in the engine house seeking to surrender moments before Lt. Green beat Brown to the floor with the haft of his sword during the marines' assault (178-80). Again, Horwitz credits the account of Brown's plan to seize Harpers Ferry that the defector, Hugh Forbes, misrepresented to Brown's financial backers in an effort to discredit Brown and steal their support for a similar project of his own. Horwitz agrees with the thrust of recent scholarship that Brown's conduct as a prisoner and his eloquent speech before receiving sentence at the end of his six-day Virginia trial effectively put his accusers on trial (214).

Basing his war against slavery on the Golden Rule and scriptural injunction, Brown insisted he had done "no wrong" in attacking slavery. Before Virginia authorities hanged him on December 2, 1859, he played the martyr to perfection in crafting letters to sympathizers in the North and in greeting visitors to his prison cell. But Brown's "beatification" and his admirable courage in facing the hangman raise a question that implicitly challenges all Brown scholars. How could the John Brown who sacrificed three of his sons in the cause and prophesied that his "guilty land" would pay in blood for the sin of slavery also be the author of the "Pottawatomie massacre"? In that May 1856 incident on the Kansas frontier, Brown had directed a party consisting chiefly of four of his sons in butchering five settlers, two of them "boys" just twenty-two and twenty years of age. His victims' crimes were presumably their support for the proslavery faction in the Territory and threats of violence against their free-state neighbors.

We have no evidence that Brown ever expressed remorse for the slayings, even to his own sons. Nor did he embrace his own death as an atonement for Pottawatomie. Old John Brown remains a troubling, morally ambiguous symbol of both brutality and self-sacrifice. Tony Horwitz's meticulous, vivid retelling of the Brown story adds important detail and fleshes out the cast of characters. If *Midnight Rising* does not perhaps raise the reader's pulse, it merits a place alongside more probing or more fully contextualized recent books by Evan Carton, Louis DeCaro, Paul Finkelman, Blakeslee Gilpin, Brian McGinty, Franny Nudelman, Merrill Peterson, David Reynolds, Bruce Ronda, and John Stauffer. Old Brown seems destined to haunt pages yet unnumbered.

Robert E. McGlone is associate professor of history at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa and the author of John Brown's War Against Slavery (Cambridge, 2009).