

John Brown, Abolitionist: the Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights/Terrible Swift Sword: the Legacy of John Brown

Galin Berrier

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2005 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Berrier, Galin. "John Brown, Abolitionist: the Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights/Terrible Swift Sword: the Legacy of John Brown." *The Annals of Iowa* 64 (2005), 375-377.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol64/iss4/6>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

definitive product as one can imagine, the authors presumably hoped that it would inspire perpetual research and supplementation.

Peter Palmquist's untimely death in 2003 ended prospects for additional regional surveys by this research team. This second volume, however, completes a thorough study of early photographers in the American West. Exceeding the utility of a desktop reference, this book provides a sweeping, personalized history of an emerging profession.

John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights, by David S. Reynolds. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. x, 578 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$35.00 cloth.

Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown, edited by Peggy A. Russo and Paul Finkelman. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. xxx, 228 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$59.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer Galin Berrier is adjunct instructor in history at Des Moines Area Community College. He is the author of the chapter, "The Underground Railroad in Iowa," in *Outside In: African American History in Iowa, 1838-2000* (2001).

David S. Reynolds describes his thoroughly researched and engagingly written *John Brown, Abolitionist* as a "cultural biography . . . 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" (9). He portrays John Brown as free of racial prejudice, respectful of black culture, and inspired by the example of successful slave revolts. Like other biographers, he stresses Brown's stern Calvinism and shows how he followed the example of the seventeenth-century English Puritan General Oliver Cromwell. Whereas most abolitionists were pacifists, Brown employed violence and perhaps terrorism in a holy cause.

Those who view John Brown as a crazed fanatic or criminal have stressed his part in the slaughter of five proslavery settlers on Pottawatomie Creek in Kansas in May 1856. Reynolds, while not condoning those killings, insists that they were explainable, given "the special conditions of time and place" (139). He thinks the ill-fated Harpers Ferry raid was not necessarily doomed to failure if viewed in the context of American slave insurrections (105). Disavowed by many after the raid, Brown, with his noble demeanor facing the gallows, earned the admiration of the Concord Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, who rescued his memory "from infamy and possible oblivion" (344).

Terrible Swift Sword collects 13 essays from various disciplines, including literature, creative writing, psychology, African American studies, political science, film studies, and anthropology, as well as

history. In the introductory essay, Paul Finkelman addresses the contemporary notion that John Brown was in some sense "a modern terrorist" like Timothy McVeigh or those anti-choice fanatics who bomb women's health clinics. He rejects this facile analogy, seeing Brown—as he no doubt saw himself—as a soldier fighting a war: "He killed those who threatened to kill him. This, after all, is what warfare is about" (xxv). In the chapter titled "A Behavioral Analysis of John Brown: Martyr or Terrorist," criminologist James N. Gilbert also addresses the terrorist issue and comes to a very different conclusion: "Brown's deeds conform to contemporary definitions of terrorism, and his psychological predispositions are consistent with the terrorist model" (112).

Brown's "psychological predispositions" also figure in the chapter titled "A Psychological Examination of John Brown," by clinical psychologist Kenneth R. Carroll. In *To Purge this Land with Blood* (1970, 1984), historian Stephen B. Oates sought to discredit the notion that John Brown was insane (329–34). Likewise, David Reynolds, in commenting on Brown's own assertion that he was not insane, writes, "Was he right? I believe so" (351). But Carroll suggests that "Brown was manic, probably suffering from what today is called bipolar disorder" (126), although he also asks, "Could Brown have been acquitted on an insanity defense? Almost certainly not" (135).

None of the essays in *Terrible Swift Sword* refers explicitly to Brown's presence in Iowa, although Gilbert unwittingly perpetuates the notion that "in December 1858 the state of Missouri . . . offered a reward for Brown's capture" (111) after the raid that led to Brown's last journey across Iowa with 11 African Americans freed from bondage by force. It has been known for at least 75 years that the Missouri legislature never authorized such a reward, despite the rumors that circulated at the time.

Reynolds does refer to John Brown's visits to Iowa. He describes the occasion in October 1856 when Brown was "welcomed as a guest in the home of the genial Quaker Jonas Jones" (207) at Tabor. Returning to Kansas in August 1857, "Once again he lodged with the kindly Quaker Jonas Jones" (237). Rev. John Todd, who led the community of Oberlin, Ohio, Congregationalists who founded Tabor in 1852, refers in his autobiography, *Early Settlement and Growth of Western Iowa, or Reminiscences* (1906), to a Jonas Jones who built the first two-story house in Tabor in 1855–56, but does not refer to him as a Quaker (47). In describing the well-known winter sojourn of John Brown and his men near Springdale in Cedar County in the winter of 1857–58, Reynolds says that Brown "stored his weapons with the Reverend John Todd and had his men board with Quaker residents" (246). This juxtaposition suggests that Reynolds has conflated the Congregational

community of Tabor in southwest Iowa with the Quaker settlement of Springdale in eastern Iowa.

Like most studies of John Brown, the two reviewed here focus not on Iowa but on the more dramatic events in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry. Some contributors to *Terrible Swift Sword* deal with these events directly, while others do so only in passing. After a slow 100 pages on Brown's early life, Reynolds hits his stride with his engrossing analysis of these same events. The result is a highly readable biography of John Brown in the great tradition of those by Oswald Garrison Villard and Stephen B. Oates.

Jessie Benton Frémont: Missouri's Trailblazer, by Ilene Stone and Suzanna M. Grenz. Missouri Heritage Readers. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005. xv, 122 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$14.95 paper.

Reviewer Vernon L. Volpe is professor of history at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. He is working on a biography of John Frémont.

Jessie Benton Frémont certainly deserves greater public attention. Daughter to a famous U.S. senator, Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, and wife to a renowned if flawed explorer, presidential candidate, and Civil War general, John C. Frémont, Jessie has been memorialized by several novels, biographies, and television movies. Although never an outspoken advocate of women's rights, her pioneering role as a woman involved in political campaigns and controversies has recently attracted greater scrutiny and respect. Jessie's celebrated marriage to John Frémont won great notoriety in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and certainly should not be forgotten in the twenty-first.

This slim and easy-to-read paperback seeks to make Jessie's "trail-blazing" life more accessible to today's public, perhaps especially younger readers or those new to the broad outlines of nineteenth-century American history. In this task Ilene Stone and Suzanna M. Grenz succeed nicely. The brief biography includes several appropriate illustrations and a suitable annotated bibliography suggesting further reading. The series does not allow footnote citations, but the text does cite relevant primary sources and secondary works by title and author. Making no elaborate claim to scholarly originality, the work does rely on authorities such as Donald Jackson and Pamela Herr.

Stone and Grenz sketch the highlights of Jessie's long and fruitful pioneering life. Untutored readers will learn of her family and then her celebrated elopement with the young army officer, John Frémont. Readers then follow John and Jessie's climb to national fame thanks to his well-publicized—due to Jessie's involvement—western explora-

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.