

Regardless of your age or antecedents, *In No Time At All* has something important to say to you about an almost forgotten era in our nation's history. Don't miss it.

—Herbert Hake  
Cedar Falls

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*The Legend of John Brown: A Biography and a History*, by Richard O. Boyer. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1973. pp. 627 Bibliography, Index, Notes. \$12.50.

The title of this important work is somewhat misleading. It is less concerned with delineating the legend of John Brown than with placing it in perspective and humanizing it. Boyer treats Brown and his society to 1855, when Brown made his fateful trip to Kansas. A second projected volume will deal with the last four traumatic years of Brown's life.

Boyer does not attempt to establish that Brown was normal or even sane, but instead tries to put his strange actions within the framework of his society as a whole and so provide a plausible explanation for both. Brown reflected many of the values and trends then prevalent in America, and, by seeing him in this light, the man becomes less puzzling. This is Boyer's major contribution, for few historians have attempted to place John Brown's life in a broader context, perhaps because of the magnitude of the task. If Brown ultimately turned to violence, the American people were doing the same thing, as economic differences and especially slavery continued to eat away at the nation's psychological equilibrium. Brown merely became a focal point of a general national crisis. He happened to reach his personal crisis just at the time America did, and that explains, in large part, his historical significance. If he was shaken and angered by the murder of Elijah Lovejoy, the passage of the Fugitive Slave and Kansas-Nebraska

Acts, and if he was influenced by such phenomena as the violence taking place in Congress and the European Revolutions of 1848, so were thousands of other Americans. After Boyer has finished exposing the reader to countless examples of the American propensity for mindless violence, such as the Border Ruffians, who could admire "the delicate sensitivity of South Carolinian Louis T. Wigfall, who met a friend in the street, was invited to his wedding, strolled on a few yards, then suddenly shot and killed the scheduled bridegroom for a word, perhaps accidental, that Wigfall felt reflected on his gentility" [p. 492], then Brown and his actions do not seem quite so weird and inexplicable. Boyer argues that historians have too often separated Brown from his times, with its "duels and shootings and assaults, its go-to-hell bravado, . . . its long cold war over slavery, its private armies and filibustering" [pp. 516-17]. But within that context, John Brown seems less a psycholigical outsider and more a "representative of a tragic and violent age" [p. 517].

Boyer is excellent as he subtly develops the various critical episodes in his subject's life, and as he describes the growth of his character. He shows the important effect of Brown's father in stimulating his abolitionist views; he describes his participation, as a boy of twelve, in the War of 1812, in which he saw a black slave boy severely beaten, and because of which he became a non-resistant for years thereafter. Boyer writes meaningfully and with great skill of Brown's absolute trust in God and fate, his thirst for knowledge, his devotion to hard work, his role as a stern and yet very loving, tender, and even sentimental husband and father, his belief in equality, as when in 1836 he insisted upon desegregating the church he and his family were attending, and his many occupations, including those of tanner, cattle dealer, surveyor, post-master, community leader, lay educator, and lay preacher.

If the author finds much in his subject that is worthwhile, however, his book is no simple eulogy to Brown. Boyer is well aware that he is dealing with a flawed hero, who is altogether human. The author seems most disturbed by the legend of John Brown, because it has obscured more than it has revealed. In that legend, Brown has been depicted either as a saint or as a devil, who never strayed from his abolitionist purpose; and it ignores also the universal human factors of growth and change. Again

and again, after some crucial event, Brown would promise himself, his family, and others that he would devote his life to ending slavery, by force if necessary. And again and again, his resolve would dissipate, and his desire to succeed in business, to help his family, and to fend off seemingly innumerable law suits would consume his time and energy. As Boyer puts it, "His postponements and delays in fighting slavery before 1855 were almost as numerous as his business failures and not unconnected with them. In either enterprise, it was difficult to do well without abandoning the other" [p. 126]. Brown was painfully indecisive and was no faster and was perhaps even slower in reaching a total commitment to abolition than the majority of Americans of his day. Moreover, while the legend makes no room for fear in its subject, Boyer suggests that Brown may have had the "normal human reluctance to being killed" [p. 519]. But if John Brown was at times weak and frail, Boyer points out that there were also other "part-time heroes" in both the North and South, who betrayed the same human traits, but who also somehow found the courage to face the ultimate when the crunch finally came.

Brown's moment of truth came in 1855, when the internal and external pressures of twenty years of vacillation came to a head within him, and he was in a sense reborn. He would from then on dedicate his life totally to the destruction of slavery and would never again participate in business. He was free at last. Brown then gathered arms, ammunition, and men, and Boyer ends the book with his subject joining his sons in Kansas to begin the last four years of his life.

On occasion, Boyer is perhaps too quick to make generalizations about American sections and society from relatively few examples. Again, when he is discussing the Underground Railroad, he accepts uncritically the works of Wilbur Henry Siebert and seems to have no familiarity with the work of Larry Gara, who has called into question Siebert's sources and conclusions, and who is generally regarded to be the best authority on the subject. Moreover, he tends to neglect the development of certain important individuals such as Jackson and Calhoun, and he shunts aside Henry Clay with the single statement that the "great compromiser" compared with Webster "was only an adroit red-faced politician, a bluff and hearty slaveholder of some skill, but who

could not hold his liquor as impressively as the darkly noble Daniel" [p. 428]. Finally, although the book's footnotes and index are fine, Boyer's bibliography presents only the many manuscript sources he used.

But why carp? This is a brilliantly written, magnificently paced, and beautifully organized book; and it must be considered the standard biography on the subject. Boyer has mastered the complexities and subtleties of a huge number of people and events in Brown's era. His sketches of Parker, Emerson, Jefferson Davis, Thoreau, Howe, Ruffin, Wise, Benton, Atchison, John Quincy Adams, Yancy, Thayer, William Walker, and even Brown's sons are among the best written, most perceptive and sophisticated characterizations this reviewer has ever encountered. He has gone to great lengths to be fair to Brown, to place him meaningfully into the context of the times, and above all to pursue the truth; and he has succeeded.

—Gerald W. Wolff  
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*The History of Wisconsin. Volume I: From Exploration to Statehood*, by Alice E. Smith. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison. 1973. pp xiv, 753. Illustrations, maps, notes, essay on sources, index. \$15.00.

This splendid book on Wisconsin history is truly required reading for any sincere student of Iowa history, as it will also be for students of Michigan, Illinois, and Minnesota history. It is unlikely that any person other than Miss Alice E. Smith could have brought such imposing qualifications to the task of researching and writing this book. Her career as chief of the manuscripts division of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and her studies leading to a biography of James Duane Doty, a principal actor in Wisconsin territorial and early state history, gave her an unmatched familiarity with the primary materials required for

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