

THE PALIMPSEST

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Volcano in Eruption

The decade of the 1850's was marked by bitter political strife in the United States. The Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Dred Scott Decision, the Underground Railroad, and the Fugitive Slave Law, these were subjects of bitter editorial debate in Iowa as well as in the nation. The tempo of this debate reached a climax with John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry and the subsequent execution of this fiery abolitionist and his followers in December, 1859. For Iowans the story continued into 1860 as the Governor of Virginia endeavored to extradite a young Iowa Quaker — Barclay Coppoc — who had participated in the raid on Harper's Ferry.

Between 1855 and 1859 John Brown was a veritable volcano in eruption. Born in Torrington, Connecticut, on May 9, 1800, Brown was fifty-five years old when he began his career of violence that ended on the gallows. His father, Owen Brown, of sturdy New England stock, had plied many trades, moved frequently, and was de-

scribed as a man of "much piety, an abolitionist, and an agent of the underground railroad." On his mother's side Brown's ancestry was not so good — Ruth (Mills) Brown was insane for a number of years and died insane, as did her mother before her. Other members of the Mills family were similarly afflicted.

John Brown was twice married. His first wife, Dianthe Lusk, appears to have had "mental aberrations" before her death in 1831. She bore him seven children, two of whom were of unsound mind. His second wife, Mary Anne Day, was sixteen and "of robust physique" at the time of her marriage in 1832. She bore him thirteen children in twenty-one years.

John Brown had little education, schools always meaning "confinement and restraint." He preferred the free life of the wilderness and was never happier than when permitted as a youth to drive beef cattle to military posts during the War of 1812. Later he worked at the tanners trade with his father. In 1825 John Brown moved to Richmond, Pennsylvania, where he set up his own tannery. This was the first of ten migrations before his adventures in Kansas. Between 1825 and 1855 he established and sold tanneries, speculated in land, and engaged in wool growing. From first to last his business career was replete with failures.

An abolitionist like his father, Brown had used

his barn at Richmond as a station on the underground railroad. He was well over fifty, however, before the idea of freeing all slaves by force obsessed his mind. The torch was ignited, perhaps, when five of his sons went to Kansas in the spring of 1855 to take up land and help win the territory for freedom. In May, 1855, John Brown, Jr., wrote his father, who was living in Akron, Ohio, pleading for arms to aid the free soilers. By August, John Brown was on his way to Kansas with a wagon filled with arms and ammunition.

Upon his arrival in Kansas, John Brown quickly became leader and captain of the local militia in Osawatomie. When the pro-slavery forces sacked Lawrence, Brown and his men determined to retaliate. A list of pro-slavery leaders was made out and on May 24, Brown and a party of six, four of whom were his sons, fell upon their five hapless victims without warning and hacked them to pieces with their sabers. From that time on "Old Brown of Osawatomie" became a terror to all pro-slavery settlers. Eventually, Brown and his men were beaten and Osawatomie sacked and burned. In this guerrilla war, Frederick, one of Brown's mentally unbalanced sons, was killed.

It was on his return from Kansas in the fall of 1856 that John Brown first stopped at the Quaker settlement in Springdale, Iowa. He returned again to this quiet community in November of 1857 and spent the winter with his Quaker

friends. Meanwhile his experiences in Kansas had greyed his hair and bent his figure and so warped his mind that he could think of nothing but freeing the slaves. One keen observer, John Murray Forbes, detected "a little touch of insanity about his glittering gray-blue eyes." Ralph Waldo Emerson, on the other hand, spoke of him as "a pure idealist of artless goodness." The Sage of Concord probably was ignorant of Brown's Kansas murders.

By 1857 both sides in Kansas had agreed to settle their differences with ballots rather than bullets. Brown accordingly dragged his guns, pikes, and cannon back East, staying with his Quaker friends at Springdale all winter for lack of funds. By this time he had determined to call a convention of his followers, both white and black, in Chatham, Canada, where he outlined his plan to free all slaves. The convention followed Brown's suggestion to: (1) establish a base in the mountains of Virginia and Maryland; (2) adopt a provisional constitution which should serve the new free state composed of abolitionists and Negroes; and (3) named Brown himself commander-in-chief. Many of these ideas, including the Harper's Ferry raid, were developed while crossing Iowa and while wintering among the Quakers.

John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry was undertaken with only twenty-two men, six of whom were Iowans — Edwin Coppoc, Barclay Coppoc,

Stewart Taylor, Jeremiah G. Anderson, George B. Gill, and Charles W. Moffatt. Hailed by his followers as a martyr and by his enemies as a vicious murderer, Brown preferred to call himself "an instrument in the hands of Providence." He was jailed in Charlestown, Virginia, and indicted for "treason to the Commonwealth," and for "conspiring with slaves to commit treason and murder." His trial was conducted with "exemplary fairness" but the decision was inevitable — death by hanging, which took place on December 2, 1859. Edwin Coppoc and John E. Cook were executed on December 16.

While the nation still buzzed with excitement over Harper's Ferry, Abraham Lincoln referred to it in his Cooper Union speech of February 27:

That affair, in its philosophy, corresponds with the many attempts, related in history, at the assassination of kings and emperors. An enthusiast broods over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them. He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution. Orsini's attempt on Louis Napoleon, and John Brown's attempt at Harpers Ferry were in their philosophy precisely the same.

Richard Realf, who wintered with John Brown among the Quakers in Springdale in 1857-1858, left a soul-searching evaluation of John Brown and the Abolitionist crusade that might well give Americans pause for thought a century later. One of Brown's most ardent followers, Realf had been



Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

Richard Realf

delayed in England by business and had returned after Brown was executed. *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* of February 4, 1860, carried the following from Washington:

"FRANK LESLIE, ESQ. — Dear Sir — From personal observation I became convinced that gradual emancipation is the only form of Abolition that will not disastrously affect the slave. I sincerely believe that, in spite of scourges and chains, and spite of statutes and laws, the bodies and souls of the colored population are treated with more kindness, charity and love, as from man to man, in the Slave South than

in the Free North. Wherefore, until the North has given better evidence of the sincerity of her professions of love for the slave than she has ever yet manifested, I have no desire to assist in placing them there. When an Abolitionist, it was because I loved my enslaved brethren; now that I oppose it, it is by reason of the same feeling. The South is better, nobler, than her laws — the North in nowise reaches to the measure of her professions. I cannot, therefore, bid its aggressive agitation God speed. When her deeds of love keep pace with her sounding speech, I shall be with her. Not until then.

My estimate of the character of John Brown is this: He was single-hearted, single-minded, single-ideal. 'Much study had made him mad.' The enterprise in which he died was the passion that swayed all his life; it possessed him like a frenzy, he did not possess it as an idea; it was not his servant, it was his master. I abhor that deed, but I bow myself reverently before his otherwise high nature. Stale calumnies have been hoarsely echoed over his grave by men who were not worthy to unloose the latchet of his shoes. He was not a martyr, because he was possessed by a passion rather than by a principle; he was no moral malefactor, for he believed that passion to be a principle. It was an intellectual error which precipitated him upon a cruel and wicked deed — he stood upon his own frenzy when he thought he stood on the high truth of Heaven. There is a wrath of conscience, and there is a wrath of idiosyncrasy, with which it is sometimes confounded. This was the mistake of John Brown. He is at rest now. I repudiate his foray. Yet, now that the law has asserted its supremacy, I declare that I loved him in his life, and yield to no one in honor of his memory now.

My residence is in Texas. After a brief lecture tour in the North, I return thither. You will please use this scrawl, if you use it at all, not in the precise form in which it is written. My opinions in regard to Slavery and Brown may be given verbatim et literatim.

With much respect, obediently yours,

Richard Realf.

Leslie's quoted the above without comment.

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