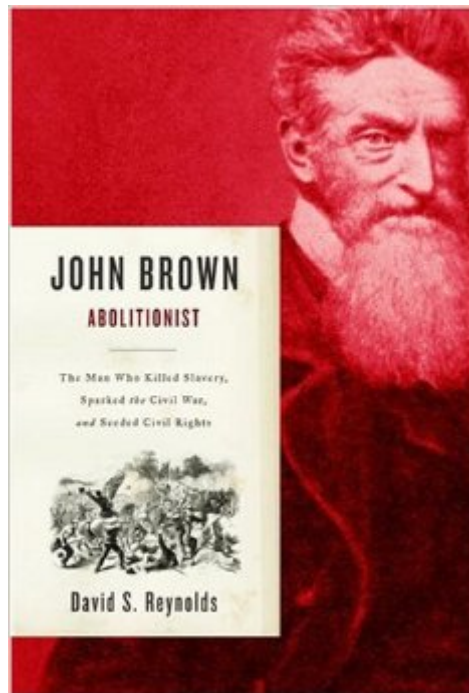


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# John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked The Civil War, And Seeded Civil Rights



## Synopsis

A cultural biography of John Brown, the controversial abolitionist who used violent tactics against slavery and single-handedly changed the course of American history. Reynolds brings to life the Puritan warrior who gripped slavery by the throat and triggered the Civil War. Reynolds demonstrates that Brown's most violent acts—including his killing of proslavery settlers in Kansas and his historic raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia--were inspired by the slave revolts, guerilla warfare, and revolutionary Christianity of the day. He shows how Brown seized public attention, polarizing the nation and fueling the tensions that led to the Civil War. Reynolds recounts how Brown permeated American culture during the Civil War and beyond, and how he planted the seeds of the civil rights movement by making a pioneering demand for complete social and political equality for America's ethnic minorities.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

John Brown is an American enigma. His life presents a serious challenge to a simple black and white interpretation of ethics, history, and by extrapolation, even current events. He was a man a hundred years ahead of his time in racial ethics - not only opposed to slavery, but unlike almost all other abolitionist of his time, actually a believer in the equality of the races. He was praised honestly by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote of him that he "believed in two articles - the golden rule and the Declaration of Independence." Another contemporary, the black reformer Charles H. Langston praised him saying, "he was a lover of mankind - not of any particular class or color, but of all

men...he fully, really and actively believed in the equality and brotherhood of man. ...He is the only American citizen who has lived fully up to the Declaration of Independence." Yet this man who was so dedicated to racial justice was able to direct the cold blooded murders of five pro-slavery men in Kansas who he had ripped from their families in the middle of the night and hacked to death with broadswords without any qualms or regrets. He chillingly stated that "it is better that a whole generation of men, women, and children should be swept away than that this crime of slavery should exist one day longer." Brown's life presents an open question on what if any limits should stand in the way of those attempting to right great societal wrongs and bring about justice. David Reynolds biography may not fully answer that question, but it goes a long way toward putting it into a proper perspective. Reynolds' biography of Brown is both detailed and fascinating, and is sympathetic without attempting to hide the dark and troubling aspects of Brown's actions. He delves deeply into Brown's Puritan heritage and just what that meant to his life and actions. He makes clear what a unique individual Brown was. While most of the famous abolitionist who were his contemporaries never questioned the basic racism of their time despite their opposition to slavery, Brown believed firmly in racial equality. Black men and women dined with his family, and he worked intimately with them, giving them real positions of authority in the endeavors that he organized - actions unique for his time. Reynolds also explores the fact that Brown was in favor of equal rights for women and humane treatment of American Indians. He notes that while he was a fervently committed Calvinist Christian, he worked closely with others who did not share his faith, including Jews and agnostics. He shows us a man who was not a typical fanatic, but a man who believed fanatically in one basic principle - the literal interpretation of the Declaration of Independence and the Golden Rule. Reynolds also puts Brown's most troubling violence, the murders at Pottawatomie, Kansas, back into the historical context in which they happened. He writes, "Pottawatomie, gruesome and vile as it was, was John Brown's impulsive response to equally vile crimes committed by the proslavery side." Beyond all of this, Reynolds explores in some depth the importance that the Transcendentalists had in securing John Brown's place in American history. He points out that had not Thoreau and afterwards Emerson come to Brown's public defense, Brown very well could have been forgotten by history - viewed as just one more aberrant crank with misguided and wild schemes. He spends more than one hundred pages exploring the effect Browns actions, capture, and death had on both his contemporaries and on posterity, showing the immediate impact Brown's life and death had on the country in helping to spark the Civil War, and the way it impacted future generations who have both lauded and reviled him. John Brown's life is a testimony to one man's uncompromising commitment to his ideals, and to the ethical morass that can result from an

unrelenting pursuit of those ideals. It makes us question how far one can justifiably go in an attempt to right societal wrongs, and if violence can ever be considered a righteous answer to entrenched evil. Reynolds' book may not answer all of these questions, but it most effectively poses them for our consideration. It is an outstanding biography of a crucially important figure in American history. I highly recommend it, both to those interested in American history, and for anyone who wishes to examine a practical study of the consequence of principled violent action against authority. Theo Logos

In his book, David S. Reynolds addresses the historical problem of why John Brown had an impact on the course of national events in America even well after his death. Reynolds weaves an intricate analysis of his historical problem by incorporating cultural, social, political and economic history of antebellum America. Reynolds makes a strong case for his argument, and instructs the reader how the social and cultural climate of antebellum America offered the prime conditions under which Brown became infamous. Reynolds' work is set apart from his contemporaries in that he presents a positive portrait of Brown in contrast to other scholarship that tends to depict Brown as an insane madman who briefly stepped into history but did little to influence it. Reynolds' positive representation of Brown may seem contradictory considering his position that Brown was a terrorist. However, as Reynolds states, Brown was not a terrorist by the same definition that we use today. Reynolds defines terrorism as "violence that avoids combat, is used against the defenseless (often civilians), and is intended to shock and horrify, with the aim of bringing about social change." Brown committed what Reynolds classifies as "good terrorism" by carefully selecting his victims (pro-slavery white males) which sets Brown apart from modern day terrorists whose violent activity is intended to kill anyone. Reynolds' interpretation of Brown is presented in such a way that the ends justify the means; and while Brown's tactics were horrific and brutal, it was for the common good of society and to uphold divine law. Reynolds offers a very in depth analysis of the life and events surrounding John Brown. He offers detailed accounts of how the lives of well-known antebellum figures such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Ralph Waldo Emerson intersected with John Brown. However, I found this book to be challenging in places because Reynolds often digresses on other characters and events of the antebellum period. While informative and interesting, the digressions were a little overwhelming to the overall story of John Brown. What I appreciated most about Reynolds' book was that it made me question how far one can justifiably go in an attempt to right societal wrongs, and if violence can ever be considered a righteous solution to correct those wrongs. To take it one step further, can the use of violence be

justifiable in upholding the Constitution. When one considers this question, it is easier to identify with Reynolds' portrayal of John Brown.

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