

# NEW ENGLANDER

AND

## YALE REVIEW.

No. CXCIII.

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APRIL, 1886.

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### ARTICLE I.—JOHN BROWN.

*The Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia.* Edited by F. B. SANBORN. Boston: Roberts Brothers. 1885.

It is rarely that we have taken up a book with larger expectations, and laid it down with a completer disappointment, than Mr. Sanborn's *Life of John Brown*.

There was everything to encourage us to expect a book of incomparable interest and value. There was the most heroic and statuesque figure in recent history to be delineated. There was the most thrilling episode in the epic of American emancipation to be narrated. There were some of the most characteristic scenes of American life to be depicted, tender, grotesque, awful, pathetic or sometimes of idyllic beauty. And the author seemed just the man for the work. He is a writer of unquestionable ability and good taste, both in prose and in verse. He has an honorable record of devotion to humane enterprises. He was not only one of the singularly diverse multitude in all

parts of the country with whom the career of his hero came in contact, but he was the youngest of the six trusted friends who were admitted to the secret of that fatal plot which ended on the scaffold at Charlestown. He was the faithful friend of the survivors of Brown's heroic family, and the depositary of ample stores of authentic material, which he has increased by his own diligence. And at the right point of time, when the lapse of a quarter-century had just ripened the subject for the most effective treatment, he set his hand to the task. By what effort of intellect he has been able to avoid producing one of the great biographies of all literature, it is not easy to understand. But he has avoided it with complete and impressive success. There are good sentences in the book, and even good pages; and there are abundant good materials; but the book is a literary failure.

The author's main fault is his inability to tell a consecutive story. He deals freely in the pluperfect and future perfect tenses; and the reader is continually annoyed by announcements of what he is coming to by-and-by, and explanations of matters that had failed of due mention in their proper places. In this zig-zag fashion the story hitches along, and at the end of it one feels that a vast profusion of unnecessary and unimportant details has crowded out matters of essential importance to the mere understanding of the story, to say nothing of things that would have contributed immensely to heighten the vividness and picturesqueness, and thus the substantial truthfulness of it. The writer has not been able to keep steadfastly in mind that he was writing for a generation removed by more than twenty-five years and by a great social revolution, from personal knowledge of the events of which he speaks. His *quorum pars fui* is not always a help to him—it sometimes hinders him from the adequate narration of essential facts which it seems to him as if every one must know. Thus he gives only the most casual passing mention to the great work of Mr. Hale in organizing the Emigrant Aid Society;\* and to the character

\*It was no inadvertence in the biographers of Mr. Garrison, but a characteristic of the school in which they were trained, that they could find no language but that of insult to bestow on the man who first in our time organized an effectual check to the spread of American slavery.

of that army of crusaders—in some companies of which, it was said, every fourth man was a college graduate—who marched across the continent westward and southward to the notes of Whittier's hymn :

“ We cross the prairies, as of old  
Our fathers crossed the sea,  
To make the West, as they the East,  
The homestead of the free.”

Another conspicuous defect in Mr. Sanborn's story is his failure to sketch in the accessory figures. We are made aware that he did have a handful of men with him at Harper's Ferry, for we have the number and names of them; but who and what they were, and whence they came, is left vague. And that immense tableau at the end, when all the thrones and dominations and virtues and powers of the slave interest rush in together upon the stage and group themselves around the calm figure of the bleeding warrior, while the world stands agaze at them, is an opportunity for historical painting that is almost wasted. Some glimpses we get of the foremost figures. There is a voluble fanatic, Governor Wise, overawed by the presence of a real hero; and chivalrous Lieutenant Green valiantly striking away at the prostrate and wounded man after he had surrendered; and Colonel Robert E. Lee, zealous against rebellion, representing the army of the United States; and high and mighty Mason, of the First Families of Virginia; and Vallandigham, the dough-face. But one will have to turn to the volume of *The Tribune* for 1859, to get, in the extraordinary letters from Charlestown at the time of the trial and execution, any just idea of the crowds whose grotesque and farcical aspect only deepened the solemn dignity of the closing scenes of the tragedy.

Altogether, the world has yet to wait for the Life of John Brown to be written—a work for which this volume and a second, which is foreshadowed in the Introduction, on “The Companions of John Brown,” may be regarded as *Mémoires pour servir*.\* But the world can the better afford to wait for

\* There is no occasion to particularize small details of criticism. One safe understatement is found on page 31, where the author offers it as a conjecture that “John Brown seems to have been for a short time

a biography, having the essence and spirit of it already, in Mr. Stedman's admirable ballad of "Old Brown, Osawatomie Brown."

One of the striking facts incident to John Brown's life, which became notable as soon as he rose, just before his death, into fame, was the very wide personal connections and acquaintances which he had made in the course of his generally obscure career. Every body seemed, all at once, to have some reminiscence of him. Two widely ramified New England families, well known in public life, the Humphreys and the Hallocks, recognized him as a kinsman; and in the East and the West men began to recall, sometimes from recent memory, sometimes from more remote, the grave, silent, plain man, whom they had happened to meet, as pioneer, as farmer, as wool-merchant, and by-and-by as "Old Osawatomie Brown."

Of these casual associations with other lives, there was one which, although of no considerable importance in itself, was nevertheless so conterminous, as one might say, with Brown's life, as to afford a convenient thread on which to string together a few observations on his career.

In the month of December, 1804, there arrived, on foot, at the western boundary of Connecticut, a young missionary, exhausted by the foot journey through mud and snow, from the field of his unsuccessful labors among the heathen Indians of Michigan. On the way he had rested awhile at some of those

at the Morris Academy in Connecticut." On pages 589-591, he prints a long letter from John Brown to his old teacher at that Academy. If a little pains had been spent in making a better Index, some such discrepancies would have been discovered and corrected.

But there is one inexcusable misrepresentation on page 187, of a sort which requires pertinacious contradiction the more persistently it is reiterated. Mr. Sanborn is not young enough to be pardonable for speaking of "the Abolitionists, ending with Garrison, Lincoln and Phillips." We can not permit it to be forgotten that Mr. Lincoln never throughout his career encountered from any other quarter such malignant opposition, such scurrilous defamation, as he met at the hands of the faction whose representatives now lose no opportunity of saying "we and Lincoln," and go into the court of history as claimants of his estate. According to our recollection, the favorite epithet which Wendell Phillips had selected from his extensive and malodorous repertory, with which to characterize Abraham Lincoln, was the epithet of "blood-hound."

clearings on "the Western Reserve" where settlers from Connecticut were just beginning to break the immemorial and interminable forest; and had come back to his native State, not only laden with news of kinsfolk and neighbors in the wilderness, but burning with a great thought which he was eager to kindle in other minds—the thought of organizing Christian colonization for the new country. Coming thus into Litchfield County, he found a ready welcome among the old friends of the settlers of the town of Hudson. It was a bright exception in his long, weary itinerary when he writes from Hartford, "Mr. Owen Brown brought me from Torrington to this place in his sleigh. Tell Squire Hudson that Mr. Brown and his friends calculate to move on next summer."

The day when this footsore missionary, David Bacon, rested at the farm-house of Owen Brown of Torrington, to be "brought on his way after a godly sort" on the morrow, he saw, beside the wife, and the eldest daughter of six and a half years old, and little two-year-old Salmon, the eldest son, John, a boy of four years and a half. This was the family which, with the open spring of 1805, started with their ox-teams by the route through Pennsylvania, arriving at Hudson on the 27th of July, where the missionary Bacon had arrived nearly five months before them, and had been busy as pastor over these "sheep in the wilderness," and as evangelist through all the settlements round about.

Pioneer days are heroic days, in every land and age. And no one who knows in detail the story of the early days of the Western Reserve will think it strange to put the best parts of that history into comparison with the history of the colonization of New England. This town of Hudson was founded in the spirit of the Pilgrim piety, which was well represented in the godly family of Owen Brown. At this day, if one wishes to find a typical Connecticut town of the old unmixed Puritan strain, he should look for it in the "New Connecticut," not in the Old.

Here the children of the pioneers grew up surrounded with many influences of a sort to invigorate a noble manhood. The immense toil of subduing the forest, not unmingled with peril; the close contact with nature, and seclusion from whatever is cor-

rupting or frivolizing in the world; a community so small that the children are necessarily much in the society of their seniors, men and women made grave by great burdens; and not least, the company of few books, and these of a mature and solid quality; the church as the center of society; the Bible as the one classic, and a theology which insisted to the uttermost on supreme and unreserved consecration to God as the beginning of human duty; these were among the influences that had their part in the making of John Brown.

The oldest child of the missionary was Leonard Bacon, two years younger than John Brown, and only a little more than five years old when the Bacon family removed from Hudson to new and severer privations in the founding of the Christian town of Tallmadge. But the little boy still remembered, after he had come to gray hairs and honorable fame, how Owen Brown and his children came to be neighbors to the missionary's "little hut"—Owen Brown, who stuttered painfully whenever he opened his mouth to speak, save only that as often as he lifted up his voice to pray, "the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plain." It is not eight years since the oldest survivor of the pioneers of Hudson, the venerable Mrs. Harvey Baldwin, daughter of "Squire Hudson," comparing her recollections with those of Dr. Bacon, reminded him of the famous closing exhibition of the school (it must have been in the spring of 1807) which concluded with a Dialogue out of the *Columbian Orator*, between William Penn and Hernando Cortez on the treatment of the Indians, in which little Leonard Bacon, at the age of five, as William Penn, carried with him the unanimous sympathies of the audience in favor of a mild policy, while big John Brown, aged seven, in the character of Cortez, was the advocate of sterner measures.

The years of John Brown's wholly private life down to 1855 are almost as well worth narrating as the later years, for the pictures which they afford of the pure, manly, religious character of a plain, honest man in whom was so much of simple dignity and nobleness that common things in his life could neither be vulgar nor commonplace. He "set the Lord always before him" as a righteous God and a merciful, and this presence gave a solemn, serious earnestness to all his life which was

a background on which the tenderness and loving-kindness that were as characteristic of him as his magnificent courage, stood out in beautiful relief, and which was lighted up now and then with gleams of that peculiar humor which the transatlantic intellect may learn to appreciate, but which is never produced except on American soil.

There are many sayings of Brown which a rhetorician might quote to illustrate the force that lies in under-statement; as when he remarked that "negroes behaved so much like folks, he almost thought they were so;" or as when he said of the "bogus" chief justice of Kansas that "he had a perfect right to be hung." It was quite in his father's idiom that Owen Brown said of his brothers "I never could discover the least sign of cowardice about those boys. . . None of us ever made much pretension to being scared."

Some of his sententious sayings deserve to live, and will live among the nation's proverbs. "Say to Ruth to *be all that to-day which she intends to be to-morrow.*" "It is a source of the utmost comfort to feel that I retain a warm place in the sympathies, affections and confidence of my most familiar acquaintance, my family; *a man can hardly get into difficulties too big to be surmounted, if he has a firm foothold at home.* Remember that." Luke Parsons relates: "while we were hurrying on by ourselves [to the fight at Black Jack] Brown said, 'Parsons, were you ever under fire?' I said 'No; but I will obey orders. Tell me what you want me to do.' He said, '*Take more care to end life well than to live long.*'"

In fact, Brown had a narrow escape from being a writer and talker. He lacked no intellectual requisite for it. But the influence of old Owen Brown, who could pray but could not talk, abode upon him. Coming out of a speech-making and resolving convention of Kansas Free-State men, he remarked in his ancestral dialect: "Great cry and little wool—all talk and no cider." And the strange antics of a Garrison "Anniversary" at Boston drew from him the disgusted exclamation, "Talk! talk!" It was his absolute sincerity that saved him. A little rhetoric, and the world would have lost the homely simplicity of his letters—"a grace beyond the reach of art"—and would have lost not a little of the noble dignity of his life and death.

Of the majestic courage of the man, it is superfluous to speak. The whole world stood still to admire it. Said Gov. Wise, publicly :

“ He is a man of clear head, of courage, fortitude, and simple ingenuousness. He is cool, collected, and indomitable, and it is but just to him to say that he was humane to his prisoners, and he inspired me with great trust in his integrity as a man of truth. . . . Colonel Washington says that he was the coolest and firmest man he ever saw in defying danger and death. With one son dead by his side, and another shot through, he felt the pulse of his dying son with one hand, held his rifle with the other, and commanded his men with the utmost composure.”

But the thing which most impresses the reader of his letters, and especially of that series of family letters addressed “ to my dear wife and children, every one,” is the beautiful tenderness of his affections, and the gentler graces of character which marked this fierce fighter whose very name was a terror through the Southwest. His daughter Ruth “ always noticed his peculiar tenderness and devotion to his father. In cold weather he always tucked the bedclothes around grandfather when he went to bed, and would get up in the night to ask him if he slept warm,—always seeming so kind and loving to him that his example was beautiful to see.”

It would be pleasant, if there were space for it, to transcribe more of these reminiscences in which Ruth Thompson, with a simplicity not unlike her father's, recalls the incidents of their family life.

“ Hearing that the small-pox was in one of the mountain towns not far from us, he made the long journey into the wilderness, and came to our house early one morning, fearing my husband had not been vaccinated, and so might get the small-pox. We were much surprised to see him ; and when he told us what brought him back, I thought was there ever such love and care as his ! When any of the family were sick, he did not often trust watchers to care for the sick one, but sat up himself, and was like a tender mother. At one time he sat up every night for two weeks while mother was sick, for fear he would oversleep if he went to bed, and then the fire would go out and she take cold. No one outside of his own family can ever know the mingled strength and tenderness of his character. . . . On leaving us finally to go to Kansas that summer, he said, ‘ If it is so painful for us to part, with the hope of meeting again, how dreadful must be the feelings of hundreds of poor slaves who are separated for life ! ’ ”



Thus from the center of his own home the tender love of this stern, grave man widened out over humanity, and was provoked into terrible indignation at the sight of oppression and injustice. But the love which he cherished toward his own enemies even when he recognized in them the enemies of righteousness, was nothing less than Christ-like. The absence of bitter judgment and evil speech from his correspondence is very remarkable. A good critic has justly said, "throughout the whole Life of John Brown, there is not so much of invective and bitterness as is found in a single page of Mr. Garrison. The habitual mildness of John Brown's language, even under very strong provocation, was as wonderful as was the might of his acts."\* His most terrible deeds were as devoid of personal vindictiveness as the sheriff's solemn execution of a sentence. In giving the final orders to his little band as they started for Harper's Ferry, he concluded: "and now, gentlemen, let me press this one thing on your minds. You all know how dear life is to you, and how dear your lives are to your friends; and in remembering that, consider that the lives of others are as dear to them as yours are to you. Do not, therefore, take the life of any one if you can possibly avoid it; but if it is necessary to take life in order to save your own, then make sure work of it." In the midst of the mad defense at the Ferry, the same attribute of humanity shines strangely out. Captain Dangerfield, one of Brown's prisoners in the engine house, says:

"During a sharp fight one of Brown's sons was killed. Brown did not leave his post at the porthole; but when the fighting was over he walked to his son's body, straightened out his limbs, took off his trapping, and then, turning to me, said: 'This is the third son I have lost in this cause.' Another son had been shot in the morning, and was then dying, having been brought in from the street. Often, during the affair in the engine house, when his men would want to fire upon someone who might be seen passing, Brown would stop them, saying, 'Don't shoot; that man is unarmed.'"

It would be interesting to cite illustrations of the romantic and poetic feeling which tinged the life of this plain farmer and fighter—that moved him, for example, to transport from Connecticut to his clearing in the Adirondacks the granite gravestone of his grandfather, the Revolutionary captain; and to

\* *The National Baptist*, February 18, 1886.

make a first point, in his Virginia foray, to capture Colonel Washington, that he might lead the emancipated negroes with the Washington sword. In his silent way he was a poet by instinct.

The two little boys that were mates in the school at Hudson spent each one his lifetime in strenuous conflict against slavery; but along such different lines that probably enough they did not hear of each other again until the whole country became embroiled over the troubles in Kansas, in which John Brown was so conspicuous. And at that time when the old school-mates came together, the judgment of Leonard Bacon agreed with that of most of the friends of Kansas in mistrusting the leadership of Brown. He was the spokesman of the citizens of New Haven at the memorable reception of Governor Robinson, and commended that policy of forbearance to the uttermost which Robinson had commended to his persecuted and outraged fellow-citizens in the weighty phrase, "your wrongs are your strength." And the objection to the violent acts of Brown was not only that they were precipitate, but that they were the acts of a private person, with no pretense of public authority. It had been solemnly adjudged in the tribunal of Brown's secret conscience, in view of all the evidence that he could find, that a certain gang of ruffians in his neighborhood had been guilty of murder and like crime, and were contemplating other murders. Consequently he organized a party, surprised them in the night, took them from their beds one by one down to the brook, and there, with the calmness and solemnity of an act of religious worship, put them to the sword. Here was a person whose convictions of duty, however religiously sincere, were well calculated to make him an embarrassing associate. It was the conviction of those men who led the Free State movement that the monstrous iniquities and outrages that were perpetrated in Kansas under the pretense of law, and under the protection of the prostituted and defiled government of the United States, were best to be resisted in the name of government and law; and not by private *vendetta*, however righteously conceived and courageously inflicted. And who, beside Mr. Sanborn and Mr. Higginson, will deny that they were right? The worst thing

in Mr. Sanborn's book is his acrimonious attack on the officers of the Free State government of Kansas for taking the only attitude toward John Brown and his *proprio Marte* campaigns and "executions" which it was reasonable or possible for them to take. Even the fact that they afterward gratefully recognized that his terrible deeds did actually inure to the advantage of that cause which they might so perilously have compromised, does not in the least impeach the wisdom or the right of their disengaging themselves from complicity with him and declining to justify him. It is one thing to prove that Brown acted with an honest, righteous and unselfish purpose; it is a second thing to show that the effect of his act seemed to be good; and it is quite a different thing from either, to maintain that it is right for a private person, having satisfied himself that certain individuals deserve death, and that society would be better off without them, to call five men out of their beds at night, and split their skulls successively with a cutlass. But Mr. Sanborn does not clearly see the distinction, nor perceive that the only one of his arguments in vindication of his hero which is tenable, is the argument of self-defense, which seems, from his *ex-parte* statement, to be well sustained. And when he goes on to say (page 268), "yet we who praise Grant for those military movements which caused the bloody death of thousands, are so inconsistent as to denounce Brown for the death of these five men in Kansas; war is murder;" and much more of such deplorable drivel,—the best excuse we can make for him is to remember that he learned his casuistry among those shining lights of ethical science, the non-resistant abolitionists of Boston.

The impression prevailed to some extent among the Kansas people, that Brown was of unsound mind. And there were circumstances that tended to confirm this view. One of his sons, John, a cultivated man, and a notably bright and graceful writer, as his quoted letters show, was liable to attacks of periodical insanity, and, under the devilish treatment of the border-ruffians who took him prisoner, went off into raving mania. Another son, Frederick, is spoken of by his brother Owen as at times "a little flighty." And there were other things in Brown's own course beside his conceptions of a

peculiar standard of duty applicable to himself, that led some to suspect a morbid condition of his mind. The last occasion on which the two disputants in the log school-house at Hudson saw each other was at the celebration of the founding of the neighbor town of Tallmadge, in 1859, just before Brown's departure for Harper's Ferry. Leonard Bacon, the son of the missionary founder, had just concluded an historical discourse, when, from the rear of the audience in the great tent, they were startled with a sudden cry: "Mr. Moderator! may I be permitted to add a few remarks on the subject of American slavery?" The orator asked an explanation of the incident and was told that the voice came from Old Osawatomie Brown, who had been quite crazed by the sufferings and bereavements inflicted on him in Kansas. A few months later, when the heroic old man lay under sentence of death at Charlestown, his old schoolmate made an almost hopeless effort in his behalf, writing to Governor Wise an account of this incident, and urging on him the consideration how much more it would be for the dignity and the safety of the State of Virginia, instead of treating this wild foray as a serious enterprise of rational men, to deal with it as the delirium of a disordered mind—to confine his prisoner as a lunatic, instead of putting on his gray head the crown of martyrdom before the sympathy and admiration of all mankind. Needless to say that the excitable head of Wise was inaccessible to fact or argument looking in that direction; and that if he had been persuaded, he would in vain have attempted to withstand the panic fury of his people.

This plea of insanity had more pertinence to the question of executive discretion, than it would have had to Brown's judicial trial. But it has no application at all to the case of the six gentlemen—Gerrit Smith, Theodore Parker, T. W. Higginson, S. G. Howe, G. L. Stearns and F. B. Sanborn, who abetted the wild scheme which brought the grand old hero to the gallows. There was neither lunacy nor any appreciable amount of heroism in their part of the business, to be pleaded in mitigation of their folly. Neither have the beneficent ulterior consequences which flowed from the sublime dignity of Brown's martyrdom any bearing upon the question of the right or wrong of his enterprise. It would have been just as

virtuous in itself if the actual results had been disastrous without mitigation. The right or wrong of entering on it must be judged from the case as known at the time, and not by things that happened afterwards. And the case as then known, according to the best showing of Mr. Sanborn in his own defense, was not one to justify the Harper's Ferry foray.

Two conditions are necessary to justify armed insurrection against established government: first, a righteous cause; second, a reasonable prospect of success. Few revolutions since the world began have been started with a more legitimate reason to expect success, than the insurrection led by Jefferson Davis; it was condemned by the utter baseness and wickedness of its motives and aims. Never, since the beginning of governments, has there been more righteous cause for rebellion than was found in the Virginia of 1859, and never a more unselfish heroism than in the attempt of John Brown. But of this attempt his confederate and biographer writes: "even now, as we look back on it, it seems devoid of the elements which would make success possible" (p. 122). Now to make an attempt at insurrection that is devoid of the possibility of success is wrong; the impressive and unlooked-for piety of Mr. Sanborn's reflections on the later outcome of the affair do not justify it; and the argument that divine providence used it for the furtherance of beneficent ends is very much like the old argument that we used to hear in defense of negro slavery, and not one whit more tenable.

The argument of a special revelation to John Brown, "making known God's will to him in advance," as to a "prophetic, heaven-appointed man," and of the right of the Supreme Being to grant dispensations from his own laws—this has a familiar sound; and as we read, we seem to find in the pages of our Concord friend a transcript from some old-fashioned commentator on Joshua and the Judges. "There is a divine antinomianism," quoth he, "as well as a loose and diabolic one." "This is a high doctrine, applying only to heroes; but it holds good of John Brown, and particularly in regard to the Pottawatomie executions" (p. 248). But who is to be the judge of the measure of heroism, and of the evidence of supernatural revelation, requisite to suspend the obligation

of divine and human laws, he does not inform us. In the case of the Virginia invasion, this delicate function was assumed by such eminently discreet persons as Mr. Higginson, and Mr. Gerrit Smith, and young Mr. Sanborn, whose youth might be pleaded in his excuse, did he not repeat his folly in his maturity.

This line of argument is too unfamiliar to this biographer to be handled by him with good judgment. Otherwise he would surely have reminded his hearers that this defense on the ground of an inward supernatural divine command, however satisfactory *in foro conscientiæ* is worthless *in foro publico*. Of such inward transactions between the prophetic soul and God, the administration of public justice can take no cognizance. If Abraham sacrifices his son Isaac, he must, under any form of civilized jurisprudence, suffer the penalties for that case provided. If Samuel is divinely summoned to take Agag from the hands of the civil authorities and hew him in pieces before the Lord, Samuel must understand that the summons involves, for him, the gallows or the lunatic asylum. It implies not the slightest disparagement, on the part of the State, of the reality of divine revelation to the individual, when it warns all persons who have or may have a divine call to kill, that this involves in itself an equally clear divine call to suffer the consequences, and adorn their faith by martyrdom.

There was absolutely nothing that the State of Virginia could do but find the majestic old hero to be guilty or insane. No government can suffer a hostile invasion of its territory to go unpunished, even when it is undertaken with a permit from Mr. Sanborn. It was not "a public murder," it was the due and necessary execution of law, when one of the noblest men in the world's history went from his prison to the death of a criminal, having the confidence of a certain faith and the comfort of a reasonable, religious and holy hope, in favor with God, and in perfect charity with all the world. But that verdict will stand which was rendered at the time by John A. Andrew, afterward "the war-governor" of Massachusetts: "whatever may be thought of John Brown's acts, John Brown himself was right."

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