

John Brown's body and blood

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David S. Reynolds **JOHN BROWN, ABOLITIONIST**: The man who killed slavery, sparked the Civil War, and seeded civil rights 592pp.

NY; Vintage Books. Paperback, \$16.95. 0 375 72615 2 Nicholas

Nicholas Lemann **REDEMPTION**: The last battle of the Civil War 272pp. NY; Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$24.00 0 374 24855 9 Steele
by faith in God's omnipotence, on October 16, 1859, John Brown set in motion a plan he believed would liberate 4 million slaves throughout the American South. Brown envisioned a biblical flood, not of water, but of people, rising at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers, as bondsmen rallied to the Harpers Ferry federal arsenal. This army of liberation would break over Dixie in a divine wave, cleansing the the region of sin. At nightfall, Brown and his men seized the armoury and sent patrols to take hostages and alert slaves that the day of jubilee had arrived. The next day, townspeople traded shots with Brown's gang, until marines arrived and ended the rebellion.

Brown had chosen Harpers Ferry because it evinced federal power, stained by slavery. And as he readied to martyr himself for freedom, he held captive George Washington's great-grandson, proving that, if nothing else, Brown understood symbolic politics. The marines, though, didn't consider the raid's semiotics. Led by Robert E. Lee and J. E. B. Stuart, they stormed the building and freed Lewis Washington. An officer wounded Brown with a sword. The troops then took the bleeding abolitionist to jail, where he remained until his trial. The South's slaves had to wait for their freedom.

At least for six years: in 1865, the states ratified the Thirteenth Amendment, finally abolishing slavery nationwide. In 1874, that amendment, as well as the Fourteenth, expanding citizenship and promising equal protection under the law, and the Fifteenth, guaranteeing voting rights, prompted another violent upheaval, in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Self-styled white Redeemers, convinced that freedmen with ballots menaced a divinely sanctioned natural order, disfranchised African Americans by terrorizing them. The Redeemers seized Vicksburg to ensure that an upcoming election would remain a whites-only affair. Mississippi's Reconstruction governor, Adelbert Ames, then sent African American troops to recapture the town. The white mob held off the militia and killed twenty-nine African Americans.

Separated by sixteen years and a Civil War, John Brown's raid and the Vicksburg murders are divided by more than that in most histories of the era. Brown, after all, fought for freedom. He was a champion of racial equality, whose righteous ends mitigate, even if they don't necessarily justify, his bloody means. The Redeemers, by contrast, then, were devoted to an antiquated racial order, and they killed to return to a bygone era. Disparate goals seem to open a gulf between the Redeemers and Brown that not even a shared fondness for bloodshed, underpinned by relevant scriptural passages, can close.

Taken together, however, David S. Reynolds's *John Brown, Abolitionist*: The man who killed slavery, sparked the Civil War, and seeded civil rights and Nicholas Lemann's *Redemption*: The last battle of the Civil War suggest that Brown and the Redeemers may be more closely linked than historical memory allows. Both arose at moments when Evangelicals shaped politics and policy. In the antebellum era, abolitionists, fuelled by religious zeal, pushed the nation toward war. The Redeemers, though they interpreted Christianity and citizenship differently, were equally sure of their righteousness. They, too, cloaked ideology in visions of a racially pure state instead of Brown's multiracial utopia in Jesus's humble

raiment. Racial violence, moreover, perpetrated by slaveholders, some of whom later became Redeemers, drove Brown on his path to Harpers Ferry. And following the War, the Redeemers were outraged to see the South recast in an image that might have pleased John Brown.

Reynolds first describes Brown's mission as *doomed* and *heroic*. These adjectives reveal that John Brown, Abolitionist is both a pre-history of violence and a hagiography. Because Brown was doomed, the book sometimes rushes towards the gallows. Reynolds spills little ink on young Brown, of whom we learn only that his childhood was as colourful as a Puritan church, filled with his father's lessons about the sanctity of egalitarianism. Brown, Reynolds says, thus became the most racially enlightened figure of his day, one of the very few in pre-Civil War America willing both to live with black people and to die for them. That's tough to prove, but helps make a broader point: Brown upended near-universal racial hierarchies. Other white abolitionists didn't go so far. Nor did politicians, including Abraham Lincoln, who once said, *Negro Equality! Fudge!* For Lincoln at the beginning of the Civil War, African Americans were naturally subordinate to whites; if slavery were abolished, a good thing in due time, freed people should be sent back to Africa, because they could not be assimilated in the United States. Such views, and the compromises with slaveholders they prompted, moved Brown to violence.

Brown's Calvinism pushed him in the same direction. Most abolitionists, following the Protestant Evangelical Second Great Awakening, embraced pacifism, hoping to do well in the afterlife by doing good while alive. Not so Brown, for whom predestination suggested that niceties in the temporal realm were fleeting: *In his mind God was the only true judge, and he, God's servant, was the enforcer of divine law*. Over time, events deepened Brown's belief that his was a divine mission.

In 1850, the nation hurtled towards disunion. Congress forestalled secession by opening territory to slavery and passing the noxious Fugitive Slave Act. For Brown, that was *God's trumpet waking him to military action*. This point is crucial for Reynolds, who with it explains away rivers of blood Brown shed as *act[s] of war*. The fall of Fort Sumter, however, was years away. That this mattered little to Brown, concerned only with higher law, makes sense. That this doesn't matter more to Reynolds, whose rationale for Brown's brutality sometimes wears thin, is harder to fathom.

After 1850, the story accelerates: in 1854, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, effectively repealing legislation that had ensured that slavery wouldn't spread north of latitude 36.30; instead, *popular sovereignty* would govern western territories, meaning settlers would decide if new states would be slave or free. Brown and other free-soil activists moved to Kansas; pro-slavery mobs also arrived, terrorizing the free-soilers. Then, on May 21, 1856, pro-slavery rioters torched buildings in the free-soil stronghold of Lawrence, Kansas. Over the preceding days, the abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner had given two speeches in the Senate. In one, he had mocked Senator Andrew Butler of South Carolina, who co-wrote the Kansas-Nebraska Act, for taking *the harlot, Slavery* as a *mistress*. On May 22, Congressman Preston Brooks, Butler's cousin, responded by raining blows on Sumner with a cane. The Yankee barely escaped before collapsing in a pool of blood in the Senate chamber.

Reaction hinged on region. Yankees were appalled; Southerners sent Brooks new canes. Brown exacted revenge. On May 24, he and his followers snatched five pro-slavery settlers near Pottawatomie Creek, Kansas. His gang split the captives' skulls with broadswords, biblical retribution gone mad. Reynolds's treatment of the episode is chilling. The Pottawatomie murders were indefensible, even in the context of *Bleeding Kansas*. But Reynolds finds *appropriateness* in Brown's using terror to avenge the sack of Lawrence and the caning of Sumner, typically Southern acts of violence met by characteristic Northern timidity. So Brown kicked sand back in the bullies' faces, and Reynolds, from the comfort of his study, admires muscular abolitionism.

In the two years after, with an eye on posterity, Brown produced his own legend. He befriended the Concord transcendentalists and gave interviews. He also found financial backers in New England: men of means who, from the comfort of their studies, admired Brown but wanted to keep their hands clean. Then he moved on Harpers Ferry, after which Ralph Waldo Emerson said Brown would *make the gallows as glorious as the cross*. And Brown's dignity

during his trial impressed even his detractors. He lay on a cot, still bleeding, and at his sentencing gave a homespun speech making clear his willingness to die. On December 2, 1859, Brown was hanged. All that was left was for his body to lie a-mouldering in his grave, and for his soul to go marching on.

Reynolds shines after John Brown hangs. Freed from rationalizing his subject's murders, he focuses on cultural transmission, how ideas become rooted and shape history. Brown wielded more power dead than alive. Union troops sang about him, poets venerated him. And Southerners despised him. They saw Brown as the face of abolitionism, of Republicanism, of the North; alive, he had been none of those things. Even militant abolitionists, like Frederick Douglass, had considered him a dangerous tool, a loaded gun with a hair trigger. Republicans, including Lincoln, had viewed him as a political liability. And Northerners had thought about him less than Southerners guessed. But none of that mattered. In death, Brown embodied the South's greatest anxiety: that armed slaves would rise up and throw off their chains.

The fear never subsided, as Nicholas Lemann illustrates in *Redemption*. Certainly not after the War, when former slaves had freedom, the franchise and guns. Lemann, dean of the journalism school at Columbia University and a keen observer of racial politics, suggests the Redeemers believed God had made His will clear: black people were inferior; African-American voters defiled the body politic. For white supremacists, then, killing defenseless people registered as acts of bravery, and refusal to obey laws that protected other people's rights as high principle. John Brown would have recognized the methods, if not where they led the Redeemers. The Redeemers' religious and racial views also had roots in Brown's era. As late as the 1820s, many Southerners had perceived slavery as a necessary evil. But during the Second Great Awakening, barnstorming abolitionists preached that slavery rotted souls. The criticism stung. Southern ideologues countered that slavery was, in Senator John C. Calhoun's words, a positive good. This argument turned on pseudoscience laced with Christian belief. Black people were animals who couldn't control predatory sexual impulses; slaveholders provided them with material and spiritual sustenance. And God condoned slavery, as parts of the Old and New Testaments demonstrated.

Vestiges of the positive good argument lingered in the post-bellum South. The region still smouldered, ruined by total war. Twenty per cent of its white men had died fighting for the Confederacy. And most of the freed people wanted autonomy. Just weeks after Appomattox and Lincoln's assassination, in May 1865, President Andrew Johnson outlined plans for reconstructing the South. A Tennessean and an advocate of states' rights, Johnson used dizzying logic in arguing that because secession had been illegal, it hadn't really happened. He pardoned former Confederates before appointing provisional Southern Governors. The state executives then called legislatures, elected by whites only, into session. Those bodies enacted the notorious Black Codes, denying freed people civil liberties, including the franchise, and tying them to the land. Faced with a cultural and political crossroads, the South sprinted backwards towards its past.

Dixie's intransigence enraged Congressional Republicans. In 1866, Congress sent the Fourteenth Amendment to the states. Only Tennessee ratified it in the South. Congress retaliated with the Reconstruction Acts, dividing the former Confederacy into military districts and enfranchising African Americans. In February 1868, the House impeached Johnson, and the Senate fell just short of conviction. The next year, Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment. In the meantime, with freedmen voting, southern states dumped the Black Codes and elected the nation's first African American congressmen, senators and governors. Republicans reconquered Dixie with ballots instead of bullets.

Into this chaos fell Adelbert Ames, Yankee carpetbagger from Maine, a Civil War hero and the Governor chosen by Congress to lead Mississippi through Reconstruction. Ames struggled from the beginning. For Lemann, however, Ames's failures weren't entirely his own fault. He was a victim of bad timing. After 1870, the Republican Party's interest in remaking the South waned, largely because Northerners weren't committed to racial equality and wanted to get back to the business of doing business. Reconstruction, in other words, became too politically costly. The Redeemers, along with other Evangelical terrorists in the South, sensed an opening and became the Democratic Party's de facto military wing.

Lemann humanizes the inhumane — the fall of Ames, the state he led, and the nation's collective soul — with a literary device: a love story. Ames fell for Blanche Butler while they watched Andrew Johnson's impeachment trial from the

Senate gallery, a near-perfect period tableau. After courting in the public eye, Blanche and Adelbert married. But Blanche rarely visited her husband in Mississippi, preferring her family's refined Massachusetts estate. Still, theirs was a Reconstruction romance.

The violence around him changed Ames. On April 13, 1873, Easter Sunday, a day chosen for its spiritual resonance, Redeemers in Colfax, Louisiana, killed more than seventy African Americans. Ames was running for re-election as Mississippi's Governor at the time. After the Colfax Massacre, Mississippi's Redeemers took Vicksburg. Appalled by the freedmen's prospects, and worried for his political future, Ames begged President Ulysses Grant to send troops to safeguard voting rights in the state. Grant refused. Scandals plagued his administration, the nation's economy foundered, and he worried that federal soldiers in the South might damage Republican chances in Northern elections. Despite the danger, though, Mississippi's African Americans supported Ames in the election. He won easily and organized the militia that tried to retake Vicksburg. Although the attack failed, the murders afterward captured Grant's attention. He sent federal troops to restore order in Louisiana and Mississippi — too little, too late.

For readers steeped in Reconstruction's grand narrative, Lemann's broad strokes paint a familiar scene. He treats scholarly texts like background sources, mining them for information. But the fine-grained portrait of the Ames-Butler affair and of Adelbert's evolution flesh out the image. And on the subject of cut-throat politics, Lemann is still more deft, arguing that the Redeemers learned a lesson after the Colfax Massacre: if they employed subtle tactics, meaning not slaughtering black people wholesale, federal officials would leave the South to its own devices.

The strategy worked. By autumn 1875, Democrats controlled Mississippi's legislature. And then, with racial violence cropping up around the state again, Ames requested more federal troops. Grant's Attorney General suggested Ames clean up the mess himself. In despair, Adelbert wrote to Blanche. "A revolution has taken place — by force of arms — and a race are disfranchised — they are to be returned to a condition of serfdom — an era of second slavery." With Mississippi "redeemed", Ames resigned, rather than face a Democratic state legislature, and moved to the Midwest. The freedmen remained in Dixie and watched as federal officials sold them down the river one more time, in 1877. That year, after contested returns threw the Presidential Election to the House, Congressional Republicans agreed to end Reconstruction in exchange for Southern votes to send their man, Rutherford Hayes, to the White House. Redeemers throughout the region then employed what became known as the Mississippi plan: terrorism backed by biblical metaphors, in service of voter suppression. By the 1880s, Democrats controlled the former Confederacy and started passing Jim Crow laws, codifying what they had already achieved through violence. As Lemann notes: "Once the federal government had made it plain that it would not enforce black people's constitutional right to vote, it left the way clear for the Southern states, after a time, to take that right away explicitly".

The cultural stock of John Brown and the Redeemers has fluctuated across time. After inspiring Yankees during the Civil War, Brown passed through the end of the century as an ambiguous figure in American letters. In 1909, W. E. B. Du Bois resurrected him in a sympathetic biography. At the same time, Thomas Dixon finished a trilogy of novels, adapted by D. W. Griffith into his film *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. In Dixon's and Griffith's revisionist histories, the Redeemers fought for glory, while abolitionists and carpetbaggers sullied feminine virtue and stole the South's honour. More recently, activists in the civil-rights movement reversed the trend, elevating Brown and vilifying the Redeemers.

Today, things are more complicated. The politics of the present have muddied our perspective on the past. We know all too well that faith, unfettered by doubt, can be deadly. So when Reynolds writes of Brown, "he was willing to die for his utter belief in the word of the bible", it is hard not to ask: but what of his willingness to kill? The Redeemers, beloved by neo-Confederates and white supremacists, are seemingly more easily cast into history's dustbin. But, as Nicholas Lemann insists, they won. And in the ongoing debate over limited voting rights (whether through faulty technology or the inadequate provision of polling stations), we see their legacy. So in a world in which pro-life terrorists invoke John Brown's example, and Senate candidates wrap themselves in the Confederate flag, it may be that Adelbert Ames is the best model for the present US condition. Ames, bumbling and naive, lived in complex times and was swamped by uncertainty. He tried to find the righteous path. But he kept tripping along the way.

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