



# John Brown: 1800-1859: A Biography After Fifty Years

*Oswald Garrison Villard*

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From inside the book:

"THERE never was more need for a good life of any man than there was for one of John Brown," wrote Charles Eliot Norton in March, 1860, in expressing in the *Atlantic Monthly* his dissatisfaction with the first biography of the leader of the attack upon Harper's Ferry. Twenty-six years later, in the same publication, Mr. John T. Morse, Jr., wrote that "so grand a subject cannot fail to inspire a writer able to do justice to the theme; and when such an one draws Brown, he will produce one of the most attractive books in the language. But meantime the ill-starred 'martyr' suffers a prolongation of martyrdom, standing like another St. Sebastian to be riddled with the odious arrows of fulsome panegyrists." Since 1886 there have appeared five other lives of Brown, the most important being that of Richard J. Hinton, who in his preface gloried in holding a brief for Brown and his men.

The present volume is inspired by no such purpose, but is due to a belief that fifty years after the Harper's Ferry tragedy, the time is ripe for a study of John Brown, free from bias, from the errors in taste and fact of the mere panegyrist, and from the blind prejudice of those who can see in John Brown nothing but a criminal. The pages that follow were written to detract from or champion no man or set of men, but to put forth the essential truths of history as far as ascertainable, and to judge Brown, his followers and associates in the light thereof. How successful this attempt has been is for the reader to judge. That this volume in nowise approaches the attractiveness which Mr. Morse looked for, the author fully understands. On the other hand, no stone has been left unturned to make accurate the smallest detail; the original documents, contemporary letters and living witnesses have been examined in every quarter of the United States. Materials never before utilized have been drawn upon, and others discovered whose existence has heretofore been unknown. Wherever sources have been quoted, they have been cited verbatim et literatim, the effort being to reproduce exactly spelling, capitalization and punctuation, particularly in John Brown's own letters, which have suffered hitherto from free-hand editing. If at times, particularly in dealing with the Kansas period of John Brown's life, it may seem as if there were a superfluity of detail, the explanation is that already a hundred myths have attached themselves to John Brown's name which often hinge upon a date, or the possibility of his presence at a given place at a given hour. Over some of them have raged long and bitter controversies which give little evidence of the softening effects of time.

So complex a character as John Brown's is not to be dismissed by merely likening him to the Hebrew prophets or to a Oromwellian Roundhead, though both parallels are not inapt; and the historian's task is made heavier since nearly all characterizations of the man have been at one extreme or another. But there is, after all, no personality so complex that it cannot be tested by accepted ethical standards. To do this sincerely, to pass a deliberate and accurate historical judgment, to bestow praise and blame without favor or sectional partisanship, has been the author's endeavor."


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