

JOHN BROWN

The Making of a Martyr



**By Robert
Penn Warren**



PAYSON & CLARKE LTD

New York

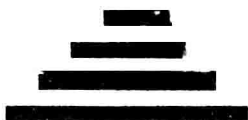
1929

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ERRATUM

Due to a misunderstanding, certain footnotes originally prepared only for the Author's convenience have been printed in this text. The Author and the Publishers crave the Reader's indulgence for this unfortunate error.

To
R. F. W. AND A. R. P. W.

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BUT NOT IN A RENTED HOUSE

IT happened on an early spring day of the year 1511. In the general barge bound to Gravesend over on the south bank of the Thames, two men, a sturdy common fellow and a priest, sat side by side. Because of the considerable press of people or because of some natural insolence toward the holy cloth the fellow crowded and elbowed his companion from that space which the priest took to be the temporal prerogative of his buttocks.

"Dost thou know," he finally demanded in great stomach against the pushing bench-mate, "who I am? Thou sittest too near me and sittest on my clothes."

"No, sir," said the other, "I know not what you are."

"I tell thee, I am a priest!"

"What, sir," the common fellow exclaimed in mock astonishment, "are you a parson, or vicar, or some lady's chaplain?"

"No, I am a soul priest; I sing for a soul."

"Do you so, sir? That is well done." And then he proceeded to add dialectics to sarcasm, as he had added sarcasm to a simple shove. "I pray you, sir, where find you the soul when you go to mass?"

"I cannot tell thee," the priest replied.

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“ I pray you, where do you leave it, sir, when the mass is done? ”

“ I cannot tell thee.”

“ Neither can you tell where you find it when you go to mass, nor where you leave it when mass is done; how can you then save the soul? ”

“ Go thy way! I perceive thou art an heretic, and I will be even with thee.”

The priest had found his answer at last — the only answer which his stubborn companion could have understood.

Some few days afterwards, the bailiff and the bishop's men burst into the heretic's house at Ashford as he was in the hospitable act of carrying a mess of porridge to his guests. They laid hands upon him, put him on his own horse, bound his feet beneath the animal's belly, and conducted him away to Canterbury, where sat Archbishop William Warham. The guests and the wife of the heretic were left with their cold porridge but with no idea where he had been taken or why.

Forty days passed, and there was no word of the prisoner's offense or of his fate. At the end of that period, on the Friday before Whitsunday, a maid of his household came upon her master held in the public stocks of Ashford. She ran home and told her mistress, who went to him and sat with him all night, listening to the story of tortures administered by order of the Archbishop and of Dr. Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, and learning at length that on the morrow he was to be burned for his faith. So on the next day, it being Whitsun Eve, they took the heretic, as it was commanded, stood him at a stake, and lighted the fire about him. Standing at the stake, in the midst of the flames, he lifted up his hands and prayed.

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*O Lord I yelde me to thy grace,
Graunt me mercy for my trespase,
Let neuer the fiend my soule chace.
Lord I wyll bow and thou shalt beat;
Let neuer my soule come in hell heat.
Into thy handes I commend my spirite; thou
hast redemed me O Lorde of truth.*

In such fashion this blessed martyr, John Brown of Kent, ended his life on Whitsun Eve, *anno* 1511, because he sat on a priest's robe, and would not deny his God.

If another John Brown, more than three hundred years later, ever picked up Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* from its honored place on a shelf or parlor table, he may have wondered if that fellow who bore his name had any connection with himself. After a blow of the sheriff's hatchet had sprung the gallows trap and made this John Brown a martyr, some of his friends half-mystically reflected on the similarity of name and fate. But three hundred years is a long while, and when the accession of the Protestant Queen Elizabeth relieved Richard Brown, son of the martyred Brown of Ashford, from his own sentence of death, he stepped out of prison into that happier obscurity from which the incident on the Gravesend barge had raised his family.

Those friends were no more wrong in their speculations than they were in a certain genealogical conviction which John Brown shared with them. In the good company of the Mayflower was numbered a Puritan carpenter by the name of Peter Brown. John Brown firmly believed this man to be the father of his line in New England. He did not know that when Peter Brown, the carpenter, was put away in one of the graves of the colony, no son survived to bear

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his name. At Windsor, Connecticut, in 1632, another Peter Brown was born, and sixty-two years later this man became the father of a son whom he christened John. When the Revolution began a third John Brown marched off from his home at West Simsbury, Connecticut, to strike a blow for freedom and no taxation without representation. Under his command went Train Band 9 of the Eighteenth Regiment of the colony, but these patriots saw no great service with his captaincy, for a few weeks later John Brown died of the dysentery in a barn in New York.

Many years later, four other epitaphs were chiselled on the old gravestone which had commemorated the Revolutionary Captain John Brown.

In
Memory of
CAPT. JOHN BROWN
who Died at
New York, Sept. y^e
3, 1775, in the 48
year of his age.

JOHN BROWN
Born May 9, 1800
Was executed at Charlestown
Va., Dec. 2, 1859.

In memory of
FREDERICK,
Son of John and Dianthe
BROWN,
Born Dec. 31, 1830, and
Murdered at Osawatomie,
Kansas, Aug. 30, 1856,
For his adherence to
the cause of freedom.

WATSON BROWN
Born Oct. 7, 1835, was wounded
at Harper's Ferry,
Oct. 17, and Died
Oct. 19, 1859.

OLIVER BROWN
Born May 9, 1839, was
Killed at Harper's Ferry
Oct. 17, 1859.

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The patriot who died in the barn in New York left a widow and ten children back home in West Simsbury. During the years of the war life was exceedingly hard for that family. Most of the laboring men were away in the army which was putting up a losing fight against the king's redcoats. The crops spoiled in the fields, the cattle strayed and died, and the Browns, who had once been comfortably situated in the world, became poorer and poorer. But at last the war ended, and the children were old enough to shift for themselves. Among them was a boy named Owen. He grew up with the memory of hunger in the terribly hard winter of 1778-79, of fighting, of revival meetings and singing conferences, and of his trips as a cobbler to neighboring towns. In his old age Owen Brown looked back with a sort of amiable complacency on that early poverty, for it had kept him and his brothers and sisters from the society of loose, vain young gentlemen and ladies who wore gay clothes and had plenty of money to spend and good horses to ride. He remembered, also with complacency, that two or three of those West Simsbury blades had filled the graves of suicides, and he could remark that God knows what is best.

With his coming of age two great events occurred in the life of Owen; he felt some vague but powerful conviction of sin and he fell in love. He was never in his life sure that God pardoned him that sin. After two years, however, he did marry the daughter of the Reverend Gideon Mills, and so his conscience by that time must have been reasonably at peace. With more good counsel than property Owen and Ruth Brown began to keep house in March, 1793. But their labors turned to good account, they were at peace with all their neighbors, and had cause for thanksgiving. One son

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was born to them — a thrifty forward child named Salmon. All was well in the new family of West Simsbury except that they lived in a rented house.

The thought of that rented house irked Owen Brown's independence. With the encouragement of the people of Norfolk, he bought a small farm in their community, sank tanning vats, and planted the year's crop. There he rose a little in the world and employed a foreman for the tanning business, but with this success came a family sorrow; Salmon, the thrifty forward child, died before reaching the age of two. Owen Brown was always restless and quick on the move. When a chance came to sell the place at Norfolk, he went hastily to Torrington, Connecticut, without consulting his neighbors, who felt they had some claim on his further services. The country here was less hospitable than that around Norfolk. The plowshare more often rasped and hung on the grey rock which the soil thinly mantled, and great boulders, too heavy to be piled for fences, dotted the fields. But the tanning business and difficult farming sufficed to give a living, and so they stayed.

In a bare boarded house, unprotected in winter and without shade in summer — but not in a rented house — Ruth Brown bore her husband a son. They named him John Brown. The child was born on May 9, in the year 1800, one hundred years after the birth of its great-grandfather John. Nothing else about the son's birth was very uncommon.

Four years passed in the bare boarded house. The old restlessness, the hope for something better in the next township, in the next state, in the country beyond the mountains, was again on Owen Brown. There were other children besides John, and the prosperity at Torrington had not kept pace with the growing family. By this time rumors of opportunities

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in the Western Reserve were drifting back to Connecticut. The Reserve had been divided among the proprietors, and David Hudson and Birdsey Norton had received the townships of Hudson and Chester in the Ohio country. In 1779 David Hudson pushed into the wilderness, slept under an oak tree in the rain with only the comfort of ownership, and surveyed his property. When Owen Brown reached Hudson township exactly twenty-five years later he found a transplanted Connecticut village whose people were very harmonious, fairly prosperous, and mostly united in religious sentiments. In this little community, so like the ones he had left three hundred miles behind him, Owen Brown bought some land and determined to settle for good and all. By the end of the next summer his family was established in Hudson. They were received with all the kindness which greeted any new able-bodied resident in a struggling settlement; and furthermore, they were from Connecticut, were Congregationalists, and had come with the determination to help build up civil and religious order. Owen Brown displayed in his craft and farming that industry which his neighbors so much admired, and after the famine summer of the second year there, when no corn got ripe, he prospered as much as he had reason to expect. But the Browns, somehow, were never the best of business men.

This Ohio country in which John Brown spent his boyhood was in those years a real frontier, even though it had been admitted as a State in 1803. The Indians still outnumbered the settlers, but they were a broken-spirited lot, harmless enough except for a few sporadic liquor-inspired depredations. Of course there were still about the settlement some of the indomitable Indian-killers, such as old Jonathan Williams, who carried on the tradition of the days when British

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rum and bounties had paid for scalps. But many of the settlers dealt with the Indians and looked upon them as more of a help than a hindrance, even if their kindliness was colored by a mild contempt. Owen Brown was one of the sort who had gratitude, for the Indians taught him to dress deer-skin. John also profited, for at the age of six he was installed in a fine buckskin outfit. Indeed, the Indians were greatly interesting to the boy from Connecticut, and when fascination overcame his fear of their long rifles, he hung about their camps as much as was consistent with good manners and even learned a little of their talk.

But a child had to justify his existence in that society, and there was no great opportunity for leisurely association with the lazy red-skinned hunters and drudging squaws. There was little chance for going to school, a fact not much regretted by the boy, for the occasion to run, jump, and wrestle, and knock off old seedy wool caps was the only pleasure to be balanced against the dull hours of sitting indoors. He would rather stay at home and do the hardest sort of work than to go to school at all. But better still he liked to drive a herd of cattle through the wilderness, alone, barefooted and bareheaded, with the buckskin breeches his father had made him suspended now with one leather strap over the shoulder, but sometimes with two. All together, there was more cattle-driving than schooling.

John Brown said that he went early to the school of adversity. He did not refer to the hungry winter of 1803 or the hard work that was required of him through his boyhood in Hudson. An Indian boy once gave him a yellow marble, which he prized much but finally lost beyond recovery, and a little bob-tailed squirrel which he captured and tamed at the expense of being bitten escaped into the