Written by Fcadmin | 24 November 2011

BY DR. GLENN C. ALTSHULER
SPECIAL TO THE COURIER


After he and a group of followers murdered five pro-slavery settlers at Pottawatomie Creek, Kansas in 1856, John Brown acquired a reputation, from friend and foe alike, as a force to be reckoned with.

"He is a strange, resolute, repulsive, iron-willed inexorable old man," wrote William Phillips, a reporter for The New York Tribune, with "a fiery nature, a cold temper and a cool head – a volcano beneath a covering of snow."

Three years later, accompanied by 18 men, including three of his sons, Brown attacked an army arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Va., hoping to incite an insurrection that would end slavery in the United States.

Brown's forces were routed in a five-minute battle by U.S. Marines commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee. Tried, convicted, and executed for murder and treason, Brown further polarized an already polarized nation in death as well as life – and made a violent conflict between the north and south seem all the more "irrepressible."

Riveting narrative

John Brown's Harpers Ferry raid is well-known to historians and Civil War buffs. In "Midnight Rising," Tony Horwitz (the author of "Confederates in the Attic") does not add much new information about the incident. He does not depart from conventional wisdom about its significance; nor does he weigh in on whether Brown's means justified his ends. Nonetheless, Horwitz provides a beautifully crafted, richly detailed, and riveting narrative of a pivotal episode in American history.

"Midnight Rising" is at its best reconstructing the lives (and deaths) of the relatively anonymous conspirators – especially the African-Americans. For Dangerfield Newby, Horwitz reveals, the mission was personal. Freed in 1858, Newby saved $741 to buy the freedom of his family, who lived about 50 miles from Harpers Ferry.

When the owner refused to sell and Newby's wife reported that their sixth child had "commenced to crawl," confessing that "if I thought I should never see you this earth would have no charms for me," Newby joined John Brown. A few months after he was killed, Harriet Newby was sold to a new master in Louisiana. Dangerfield's estate was distributed among his relatives in Ohio.

Shocked a nation

A fugitive slave living in Rochester, New York, Shields Green was introduced to Brown by Frederick Douglass, the Black abolitionist. Although Douglass expressed doubts about Brown's plan, Green declared, in his South Carolina patois, "I b'leve I'll go wid de old man."

Green followed Brown to the gallows, Horwitz reports, his athletic body carted off to a medical school in Winchester, where an observer noted his "wistful eyes staring wildly upward, as if seeking, in a better world, for some solution to the dark problems of horror and oppression."

Aware that in the short run his mission might well fail, Brown, Horwitz speculates, was willing to sacrifice his life – and those of his men – to shock the nation. He did not know, of course, that he would be captured alive, but he made the most of the opportunity.

Famous last words

If "it is deemed necessary," he proclaimed at his trial, to mingle his blood and that of his children with "the blood of millions
in this slave country, whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I submit."

Virtually everyone in America was listening. Convinced now that northerners intended to "Brown us all," fire-eaters gained the upper hand in several southern states. Although abolitionists remained a tiny minority in the north, anti-slavery sentiment grew, as did the ranks of the Republican Party. Following the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, secessionists formed the Confederate States of America, shelled Fort Sumter and started a civil war. John Brown would have been pleased.

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Last Updated ( Thursday, 24 November 2011 08:35 )