Midnight Rising, John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War

Tony Horwitz

“A month after the attack, under the headline HOW WOULD IT FIGURE IN HISTORY, a Baltimore newspaper listed the many labels given to the recent violence in Virginia. The most common were “Insurrection,” “Rebellion,” “Uprising” and “Invasion.” Further down the list appeared “War,” “Treason,” and “Crusade.” There were twenty-six terms in all. “Raid” wasn’t among them.” (4)

Tony Horwitz, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and the author of Confederates in the Attic (Pantheon, 1998). He delivers the details of the event and the people in it by choice or by chance in a narrative that weaves the documentary base into reality. Not since Stephen Benet’s epic John Brown’s Body (Doubleday, 1928) have the streets of Harpers Ferry on October 16 – 18, 1859, been so vividly portrayed. Like Benet (who is effectively invoked in section breaks) the author Tony Horwitz has a strong background in the Civil War.

His work as a war correspondent serves him well, as the John Brown raid is a battle which was intended to be a larger movement (or invasion) gone wrong. The raid became larger with John Brown’s unflinching insistence on freedom and citizenship for enslaved Americans. Placing Brown’s plan in the context of world history of small, dedicated and well-equipped forces the raid makes sense. Horwitz’s knowledge of the terrain—gained on the ground with the expertise of National Park Service ranger David Fox and NPS historian Dennis Frye—focuses his writing with extensive research notes and clarifies the story so often told in miserable confusion.
Horwitz leads us down the same road to Harpers Ferry that John Brown and his men took from the Kennedy Farm in Washington County, Maryland, on October 16, 1859. The road begins in Sharpsburg, where three years later Confederate forces under the commands of officers who captured John Brown in Virginia would march in the uphill direction toward the creeks and fields that resonate in American Civil War memory—Antietam, the Dunker Church, and South Mountain.

I took that road in the midnight hours of October 16, 1978, which was one of the few occasions that the calendar date is on Sunday night, as it was in 1859. There was no walking path across the bridge; our National Park Service AWOL guide had a key to unlock the entry gate to the trestles, and knew the train schedule because we would have been knocked into the Potomac had one greeted us in either direction. On the same road the same Dennis Frye who guided Tony Horwitz and the conference attendees at the 150th raid anniversary in Harpers Ferry in 2009 walked along. He was a history student at Shepherd University working part time at the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park in 1978, where he is now the Chief Historian. I learned the terrain from his father, John Frye, a ranger on the C & O Canal and longtime archivist at the Western Maryland Room at the Washington County Free Library in Hagerstown.

After we arrived around midnight at the engine house, roll was called of John Brown’s men. I answered to Osborne Anderson, as I was writing a documentation of *A Voice from Harpers Ferry* published the following year, *Black Voices from Harpers Ferry*. Then the group was greeted with a surprise re-enactment of the shooting of Hayward Shepherd from the NPS staff. Dennis and (I believe) John King made the re-enactment. A voice called “Halt!” Rifle shots rang out from the bridge. What I remembered most from the scene was that I could not say certainly how many shots were fired, or if all were from the same direction. “Witness unreliability” had a good example.

My decision came to treat all the eyewitness accounts of the raid as truthful from their own perspectives. The questions are: where exactly was the person? If names are used, did the person know them ahead of his and her account, or are they attached later? Consequently, those accounts that are closest in time to the event, such as the telegraphs from the B & O Railroad conductor or the letters of Mary and George Mauzy to their daughter in England—one written while Mary looks out her window and sees a “wretch” bludgeoned to death in the water and then two more “wreches” hustled up the road to the Charles Town jail while the mob following them howls for lynching are best. Mary Mauzy did not know their names at the time. A few weeks later she writes that the slaveholder of Ben (John Allstadt) was distressed at the lost of his “valuable” 21-year old property dead in jail within the week of “pneumonia and fright.”
Tony Horwitz has accurately separated the captures of Ben and raider John Copeland. Both were nearly lynched, and both were rescued by different citizens, a doctor and a minister. Using the Jefferson County Death Register Horwitz also recognizes the death of Ben’s mother, Arely, as relational to that of Ben in prison. (222-23) This is the first time this document is used in historical writing that reaches a national audience. This is the first time since Benjamin Quarles Allies for Freedom (1974) that the slaves in the enginehouse are recognizable individuals.

*Midnight Rising* reveals the life and death of John Copeland, hanged two weeks after John Brown, in an unprecedented manner. We learn with agony that his hanging was bungled, and the scaffold drop reconstructed for the later afternoon executions of John Cook and Edwin Coppoc. Mercifully, the other black raider hanged on the same day, Shields Green, died quickly. While researching in Richmond, Tony Horwitz recognized that several of John Copeland’s letters did not reach their intended recipients, including his parents, but were placed in “Letters Intercepted” in the files of the Governor of Virginia, Henry A. Wise. (265) It is only for later generations to appreciate John Copeland’s race pride and to analyze his carefully worded description of events. If it weren’t such a serious breech of historical method, it is grimly amusing that biographers of John Brown write as if he and his men put stamps on their letters and mail them from the Charlestown post office. Brown warned correspondents that his letters were closely censored. John Brown’s letters were folded and smuggled in the pages of books of his visitors, including his wife Mary who put the letter of her husband’s preference to be attended by a “grey-headed Slave Mother” in her Bible. Mary Brown hand-copied the letter to Mary Stearns with these sentiments expressed, making sure the reporters of the New York *Tribune*, whom she met at a press conference on the evening before John Brown’s hanging, received the information. ¹ The story of John Brown’s blessing the black child on the prison steps was begun by Mary Brown.

The author’s development of Brown family members is interesting and provocative. His use of letters, diaries, and reminiscences extensively includes those of Brown himself, who speaks through the narrative instead of being blocked off into quoted passages. It is the writer’s talented style which brings the historical figures to life. Mary is more than the stoic figure stuck on the farm; the genuine love of the couple and their sharing the adversity of the deaths of more than half the thirteen children which Mary bore are moving and true. Crediting Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz and her forthcoming book on the Brown women discussed at the 2009 conference in Harpers Ferry, they are active warriors.

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Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly, courtesy Boyd Stutler Collection, West Virginia State Archives, PH06-0154

Horwitz enjoys Mary’s trip to David Ruggles’ health spa in Northampton in 1849 during her husband’s European wool misadventure. John Brown returns quickly upon learning it from John Brown, Jr., but

¹ A copy of John Brown’s letter of 29th November 1859 to Mrs. George L. Stearns is in the Boyd Stutler Collection at the West Virginia State Archives. Stutler recognized that the copy was made in Mary Brown’s handwriting.
not before Mary has the opportunity to hear a woman speak in public for the first time, the abolitionist Lucy Stone: “liked her very well.” (35)

This reviewer, among others, is generously credited for research contribution in the acknowledgements. I had the recent happy experience to be introduced by the author at a book-signing in Menlo Park, California, and make an announcement of local history programming about, and with descendants of John and Mary Brown. “‘Am I Not John Brown’s Daughter?’ Annie Brown in the Civil War” will be presented by Alice Keesey Mecoy at the Sunnyvale Public Library on March 7, 2012.

The mothers, wives, and sweethearts of all the raiders are expanded with the sources. With the participation of Professor Phil Schwarz in Virginia, the story of Harriet Newby, whose love letters to Dangerfield reveal the immorality of slavery, moves forward in Midnight Rising by Tony Horwitz.

There is always more to be told, and the patient research of descendants will bear fruit at the right time. At left, Sherrie Carter of Warrenton, Virginia, and another Newby family member walk in Harpers Ferry in October 2009 with Ranger Guinevere Roper (with flowers) and NAACP President George Rutherford.

Composer Kirke Mechem’s aria “Dear Husband” from his John Brown opera was performed at the descendants’ breakfast at the 150th anniversary, hosted by the Harpers Ferry Historical Association.

photo by Jean Libby

One document that has languished in Charlestown for all these years is the Manual for the Patriotic Volunteer by Hugh Forbes. 2 Tony Horwitz is the first to describe the weaknesses and strengths of Forbes in Brown’s strategic planning. I feel that the author is right on target in relating Brown’s plans to European and earlier Roman methods. He passes a personal test that I make with Brown raid histories on the shooting of Hayward Shepherd. Some pro-Brown historians excuse and minimize it, while anti-Brown have made Shepherd a representative of proslavery attitudes. He was a free man who had worked hard to purchase his wife, Elizabeth Briscoe from Shepherdstown, and carefully registered their children born after she was free. Like Dangerfield Newby, he had a bank account of about $600 at his home in Winchester. Like Newby and many other free African Americans, all capital gains were needed to buy their own wives and children out of slavery. Tony Horwitz spoke meaningfully about this, citing and reading from the Harriet Newby letters as definitive.

2 The Manual was taken from John Brown by Col. Thomas Gibson at his capture in the enginehouse. It is now in the Jefferson County Museum. That copy was used by Tony Horwitz for his research; he noted that the full Manual is online. It was scanned from a copy donated by Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts to Harvard University in 1862.
Aaron Stephens stands out among the raiders with sharp and often profound characterization. With the author’s extensive research—used as a finishing tool rather than a sledge for his narrative—we live his shooting on the streets while under a flag of truce, his agony of capture, and steadfast devotion to Jennie Dunbar, a music teacher in Ohio with whom the tough cashiered soldier escaped from Leavenworth Prison in Kansas had fallen in love. Although unrequited, she is persuaded by abolitionists to be their representative in visiting Stephens in prison. He was not executed for three months after Brown and his companions. The chivalric Virginians would not hang a man who might be mortally wounded.

Stephens’ story is marred by a misunderstanding of the motives of Rebecca Spring, the New Jersey Quaker who came with her artist son Edward in November 1859 for the purpose of communicating about escape as well as nursing. Edward’s drawing contained a chart of the cells and walls with outside streets as well as a life portrait of John Brown and Aaron Stephens in prison. The drawings remained in the custody of Rebecca, who with her husband Marcus Spring turned Eagleswood (Theodore Weld and the Grimke sisters, administrators) into a military academy during the Civil War. Her papers were acquired by Stanford University in 1992; the drawings still unrecognized for their historical importance or even authorship. Therefore when Tony Horwitz and other researchers consult the online catalog of the papers, the two drawings made in Charlestown in November 1859 by Edward Spring are not listed. The only way to find any reference to their existence, other than my 2009 publication, is to be there.

Midnight Rising resonates with the attitude and authority of Stephen Vincent Benet in John Brown’s Body. Their analysis of Brown is quite similar: •“unreasoning as the stone, destructive as the stone, and if you like,/ Heroic and devoted as the stone.” •“If you like” is a key concept. The reader makes his and her own judgment about John Brown, the man and his motivation.

Bruce A. Lesh, in “Interpreting John Brown: Infusing Historical Thinking in the Classroom” suggests

As with any lesson, we choose what sources to use, whether they are written primary documents, photographs, videos, or political cartoons. Just as importantly, we choose what to exclude. Teachers have an ethical responsibility to present a variety of perspectives on an issue—an election, a movement, a war, or an historical character—and to do it in such a way that students never feel that we are imposing our views on them. We teach the skills—to analyze, compare and contrast, critique, evaluate, and interpret—so they might come to understand what they believe.

General readers receive this respect from Tony Horwitz. As it should be, I do not agree with all his characterizations of John Brown. The subject is balanced, and covered well with the documents. One of the best sections is Brown’s trial and courtroom behaviour. This is brought to life by the author’s journalism background and style.

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3 This reviewer published the drawings and the story of Rebecca Spring in John Brown Photo Chronology: catalog of the exhibition at Harpers Ferry 2009 (frontis., 62-63).
The poet wrote “Oh blackskinned epic, the epic with the black spear, I cannot sing you, having too white a heart.” Horwitz knows this too, and ends his history of the John Brown raid with Langston Hughes’ “October 16, The Raid” in full. (290) Mary Leary Langston cradles her grandson with Lewis Leary’s bullet-shredded wool shawl, telling him the story of her husband, one of twenty one companions with John Brown who came “to shoot your way to freedom.” We don’t know how the shawl got from Hall’s Rifle Works in Harpers Ferry back to Cleveland and then to Lawrence, Kansas. We do know that Mary nursed the 6-month old Rose left behind and married Charles Langston, a fellow student at Oberlin College and strong supporter of John Brown.

Benet and Hughes are well-memorialized in Midnight Rising, but it is the author’s originality in writing that makes this history move. Whether read comparing the well-organized chapter notes to the text or straight through with Tony Horwitz’ journalistic structure and rhythm, it is a true to life meeting with John Brown on that rainy midnight of October 16, 1859.

Jean Libby has written, edited, and published six books and DVD documentary histories of John Brown, his companions, and family since 1979. Essays are included in collections by Ohio University Press, Macmillan, and The Daguerreian Society. My current community history project is “Mary Brown and Her Daughters; a legacy of equality and cooperation in Santa Clara County, California.”

6 Benet, John Brown’s Body, 347.