The John Brown Legend in Pictures

Kissing the Negro Baby

JAMES C. MALIN

HERO-WORSHIP fulfills a popular need among all peoples, and few would question the place of Washington and Lincoln among the heroes of the American people. The status of John Brown presents a different problem, because around few personalities has more bitter controversy been waged, yet to a large portion of the nation he is the Old Hero, and no more specific label is necessary. Regardless of the disputes relative to his merits, the student of national folklore is interested particularly in examining the processes by which so dubious a character came to be accepted as heroic. Well known are the arguments of the biographers and controversialists, and the story of how the John Brown song became the marching song of the union armies. Effective, but scarcely recognized in the process of popularization, is the function of pictures.

At the time of the execution of John Brown at Charlestown, Va., December 2, 1859, the Quaker poet Whittier wrote the lines which gave widest currency to the story that inspired the three pictures reproduced here—John Brown kissing the negro baby. Prior to 1857 Nathaniel Currier published lithographs over his own name, but thereafter the firm was known as Currier and Ives. Altogether more than six thousand titles of their prints are known. The subjects were selected from scenes and incidents of everyday life. Authorities on art insist that they have little or no artistic value; that the coloring was violent and crude; but the student of American life esteems them highly, because they represent so fully the tastes and interests of the common man of the third quarter of the nineteenth century. If they are deficient in those qualities which the art critic deems essential, that fact merely reflects the cultural tastes of the class of people who liked and bought them.

In 1863 Currier and Ives published a colored lithograph entitled simply “John Brown,” and subtitled “Meeting the slave-mother and her child on the steps of Charlestown jail on his way to execution.” The publishers seem to have felt the necessity of explaining the picture even more fully by the statement at the bottom of the sheet that “The artist has represented Capt. Brown regarding with a look of compassion a slave-mother and child who obstructed the pass-
age on his way to the scaffold. Capt. Brown stooped and kissed the child—then met his fate. From the original painting by Louis Ransom."  

1 It should be noted that a number of symbolical features are incorporated into the picture: the Virginia flag with the motto “Sic Semper Tyrannis”; a figure representing “The Spirit of '76”; and at the lower left-hand corner a statue of justice blindfolded, arm broken off, the fragments and the scales lying at her feet. In 1870 the print was reissued, having been redrawn in simplified form—omitting all extraneous matter—just the resplendent military officer, the mother and child, and over all, John Brown. During the seven years intervening between the first and second prints the “John Brown Legend” had been growing apace, and the title was elaborated to read “John Brown—The Martyr.”

The third of the pictures is an oil painting by Thomas Hovenden (1840–1895), a European-trained artist who belongs to the school of photographic realism in American art.  

2 It was painted in 1881 for Robbins Battell and given by his daughter, Mrs. Carl Stoeckel, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1897. A replica owned by Albert Rosenthal was shown at the National Academy of Design in 1925.  

3 In composition the Hovenden painting is quite different from the others of the series, avoiding the symbolism of the first, and the posed tableau effect of both. In the spirit of realism, it reproduced a supposed historic scene with a fidelity approaching a news camera, but notwithstanding the number of persons present, John Brown dominates. The appeal is direct and simple, and required no explanation—he is shown in the act of kissing the negro baby.

If it were possible the historian would wish the poem and the pictures to stand as history, but truth does not permit. On the day of Brown’s execution soldiers were drawn up in lines on either side of the road to the scaffold. Rumors were afloat of plans for a rescue. No chances were taken. The public was excluded from any possible direct contact with the prisoner. The baby-kissing episode appeared in the New York Tribune, December 5, 1859, with a Harper’s Ferry date line of December 3. Whittier’s poem was printed in the New York Independent, December 22, and was reprinted widely. Had he been in a critical frame of mind at the time he would have recognized the impossibility of the story, as descriptions of the execu-

1. No biographical data on Louis Ransom have been found.
BROWN OF OSAWATOMIE
By John Greenleaf Whittier

John Brown of OSAWATOMIE spake on his dying day:
"I will not have to shrive my soul a priest in Slavery's pay,
But let some poor slave-mother whom I have striven to free,
With her children, from the gallows-stair put up a prayer for me!"

John Brown of OSAWATOMIE, they led him out to die;
And lo! a poor slave-mother with her little child pressed nigh.
Then the bold, blue eye grew tender, and the old, harsh face grew mild.
As he stooped between the jeering ranks and kissed the negro's child!

The shadows of his stormy life that moment fell apart;
And they who blamed the bloody hand forgave the loving heart.
That kiss from all its guilty means redeemed the good intent,
And round the grizzly fighter's hair the martyr's aureole bent!

The portion of the poem printed here is from the revised version as it appears in the Cambridge and Riverside editions of Whittier's poems. The original version drew severe criticism from William Lloyd Garrison in his Liberator, January 13, 1860, where it was reprinted. The second line of the third stanza read: "Without the rash and bloody hand, within the loving heart." Whether the change came from Garrison's criticism or not, the later reading was a decided improvement and softened the language as well.
"JOHN BROWN"

A reproduction of a Currier & Ives lithograph (1863) from the collections of the Library of Congress.
"JOHN BROWN—THE MARTYR"

A reproduction of another Currier & Ives lithograph (1870) from the collections of the Library of Congress.
"LAST MOMENTS OF JOHN BROWN"

A reproduction of the Hovenden painting (1881) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
tion had explained the stationing of the troops. But Whittier was a poet, the story was ideally suited to the purpose, and to be true to type, the kind of Abolition hero-martyr being created by the "Legend" makers probably should have taken his leave in this manner. James Redpath used the baby-kissing episode in his biography of John Brown issued early in January, 1860. In later years two different newspaper men, telling conflicting stories, confessed to having participated in the hoax as printed in the Tribune. The effectiveness of the propaganda is registered nevertheless in the fact that it is the fable rather than the truth which became a permanent part of the popular national heritage.