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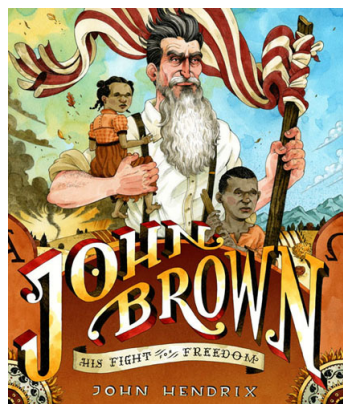
"Our country is the world - our countrymen are mankind."

L.D. BLISS, Printer

## John Brown and what kind of crazy?

"I will raise a storm in this country that will not be stayed so long as there is a slave on its soul!"  
-back cover quotation of John Brown

"Why can't we just go home--and have peace?"  
-back cover quotation of a German soldier, WWI



I sought help in understanding militarism in the pages of a children's book, *John Brown: His Fight for Freedom*, by writer and illustrator John Hendrix. When a trip to the library revealed that Hendrix had a second book out, I thought, "Great! Here's a chance to triangulate on militarism's position."

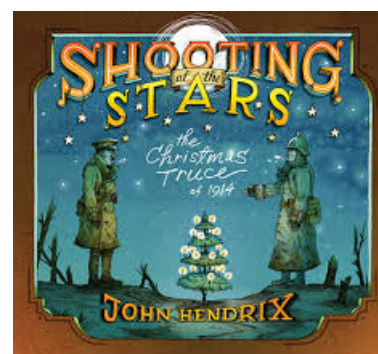
"What do you think?" I asked my young daughter after she had finished reading *John Brown*. "He's crazy," she said. "I'm also crazy, but I'm the good kind of crazy." She thought for a moment and then said, "I agree with Frederick Douglass that his plan [to attack the armory at Harpers Ferry] wasn't a good one." As she turned to walk away, she threw out one more reflection, "But I like the illustrations."

Even before Hendrix took up his masterful pen and brushes, "good illustration" seems to be historically associated with Brown. The most famous depiction of the fiery abolitionist is John Steuart Curry's mural (1938-1940) *Tragic Prelude* (see page 2 bottom). Brown poses above fallen bodies with his arms stretched out in crucifixion, a Bible in one hand, a rifle in the other. That the mural hangs today in the Kansas Statehouse is a curious fact. Brown's main connection to Kansas was the Pottawatomie Creek Massacre where

Brown and his sons executed five pro-slavery settlers in Franklin County. Brown was an abolitionist; but he was no pacifist. Was he, however, a militarist?

A scholarly definition of militarism calls it "a set of attitudes and social practices which regards war and the preparation for war as a normal and desirable social activity" (Mann 2003). Popular definitions abound and they all point to a state or culture's predilection for war. Taking up arms becomes, by default, the first solution proposed to solve problems. Military action is justified with little or no examination. War is glorified. Military affairs (including excessive federal budgets) intrude on civilian life. The perils of militarism were identified early on in the American experiment. Washington warned, "Overgrown military establishments are under any form of government inauspicious to liberty, and are to be regarded as particularly hostile to Republican liberty." Madison said, "Of all enemies to public liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes; and armies, debt and taxes are the known instrument for bringing the many under the domination of the few." In the Twentieth Century, no president spoke more earnestly--or was ignored more carelessly--than the former General Eisenhower. More than just "beware the military-industrial complex," he said:

*Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. The world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius*



*of its scientists, the hope of its children...This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.*

John Brown had a predilection for the sword. Although Brown was arguably the more ardent Christian, it was Garrison who bestowed the biblical nickname “Moses” on Harriet Tubman. The nickname Brown gave her was “General.” His attack on the armory at Harpers Ferry seems as much symbolic as it was strategic—he was drawn to a military target. And many historians have argued that it was Brown who almost singlehandedly unleashed the military solution which brought an end to slavery and disunion: Brown at Harpers Ferry provoked the South whereupon South Carolinians at Fort Sumter provoked the Union. The North, through Brown, fired the first shot.

“But though the United States hanged him as a traitor, I feel we must not dismiss him as a madman,” John Hendrix writes in his Author’s Notes. “Terrorists crave destruction and turmoil, and the seed of John’s rebellion was compassion.” Later he writes, “John was not a vigilante. The goals of his crusade were never mayhem, self-glorification, or personal vendetta, but freedom for all were persecuted. It is difficult to say if his war against slavery was simply ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ Ultimately, John Brown’s contributions was not freedom itself, but an unbridled vision of conviction.” Another place where John Brown appears in illustration is in a series of chromolithographs that appeared after the Civil War and which celebrated black freedom and achievement. One of the most famous of these posters is entitled “Heroes of the Colored Race” (see bottom left.) No less a scholar than Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes that “John Brown is portrayed in these prints just as often as Lincoln.”

So is it the “unbridled vision of [just and compassionate] conviction” which lets John Brown off the hook of being a militarist? That’s where Hendrix’s second book, *Shooting at the Stars: the Christmas Truce of 1914*, proves helpful. No war in American history is more blamed on militarism—a preference for war—than World War I, not Vietnam with its Tonkin subterfuge, nor Iraq with its nonexistent WMDs. Hendrix writes “Even a century later, the causes of this terrible war was identifiable, but they are dramatically insufficient considering the ghastly price over thirty-seven million civilian and military lives. The war was built on national pride and political glory, and even more tragically, it was completely avoidable.” He describes the complex alliances that existed beforehand: “They were precariously designed, like upright dominoes, and smallest push on one country sent all the countries tumbled into war.” Upright, it seems to me, is the one thing these dominoes were not; they tumbled into war because they were already leaning that way. They needed no nudge other than their own gravity.

Hendrix narrates the story of how on the first Christmas Eve of the War, German, French, and British soldiers

emerged from their trenches and met out in the thirty paces of No Man’s Land to celebrate Christmas together. This was no isolated event. It happened up and down the lines. It happened again in 1915, but that year British commanders actually court-martialed several of the participants. Christmas trees that were set up on the German side became the target of machine gun fire and grenades. Maybe that’s the essence of militarism—leave no grenade unthrown even if it’s at a Christmas tree, leave no hour unbloodied, even if it is Christmas Eve. Hendrix writes, “Regardless of their uniforms, the men on both sides of No Man’s Land actually fighting the war were frightened, weary and freezing. And for one bright Christmas Day, they chose to value their shared humanity over their patriotic duty.”

In the end, Hendrix isn’t trying to justify John Brown as much as he is trying to sympathize with him-- “While reading about those events [in Bleeding Kansas], I often ask myself, if I saw my neighbors threatened, my family terrorized, and my dearest friends hauled away in chains, what would I do? Would I strike back against injustice?” Militarists are happy to make their case that the ends justify the means, but their big problem is their own predisposition—they begin with the premise that the means *are* the ends. And that’s the worst kind of crazy.

*-An Old Bachelor*

P.S.-- If you ever check out Hendrix’s *Brown* book at the library, make sure to study the illustration on the double-page spread (pages 23-24): the first man that Brown’s troop killed at Harpers Ferry was a free black man, a “Christmas tree” named Shephard Hayward.

