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JOHN BROWN IN OHIO

An Interview with Charles S. S. Griffing

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John Brown's Ohio years merit continued study. In view of the fact that a serious shadow has been cast over his intentions and activities in Kansas by a formidable historian,¹ it is evident that the Ohio period may be crucial in any ultimate evaluation of Brown's role and personality. Mary Land's article, "John Brown's Ohio Environment," in the January 1948 issue of this *Quarterly* constitutes a supplement to Charles B. Galbreath's work in the field, which, however, she does not appear to have used.² Unfortunately, John Brown's precise relationship to the undoubtedly strong antislavery forces in Ohio, and his reputation, if any, with his antislavery neighbors *independent of his exploits in Kansas and at Harper's Ferry*, still remain largely circumstantial and have yet to be firmly established.

There is need for a clearer understanding than some students seem to manifest of the seriousness of the charges against Brown. It is often granted that Brown was guilty of "cold-blooded murder" at Potawatomie; but the edge of this accusation is as often blunted by emphasis upon Brown as a "fanatic"-that is, as one overwhelmed by the urgency of his crusade. The sense of both the Warren and Malin analyses is to impugn Brown's sincerity and thereby the integrity of his actions.³

The opinions of respectable personages in relation to Brown must be carefully weighed. The difficulty with Thoreau's plea for his "character,"⁴ for instance, is that Thoreau did not know enough about Brown to discuss him with authority. He assumed that Brown was what Brown seemed; but his actual acquaintance with Brown was meagre, to say the least. The same is true of other distinguished witnesses to Brown's uprightness and disinterestedness in behalf of the Negro and antislavery. A witness, therefore, who could speak from personal knowledge of Brown but from a position which relieved him of a need for supporting or defending Brown, could throw important light on a significant question. Charles S. S. Griffing is such a witness. He can today probably be best identified as the husband of Josephine S. Griffing, feminist, abolitionist, and founder of the Freedman's Bureau, whose own career has received inadequate attention.⁵ It cannot be denied, however, that Griffing was himself an ardent antislavery worker and temperance advocate and with his wife fought the good fight in Ohio, as an associate of Marius R. Robinson, and elsewhere.⁶ That he was a temperance fanatic can be readily conceded, his views not being markedly different in kind from those of other reformers of his type.⁷ His honesty in the ordinary sense, however, seems evident; his was the rectitude usually associated with the anti-slavery "apostles." In point of fact, his memories of John Brown, which have been culled from the Griffing Scrapbooks deposited in the Manuscript Division of the Columbia University Library, and which appeared in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 18, 1879, agree very well with the known facts of John Brown's Ohio years. There are relatively trifling errors which can be ascribed to the defects of memory or to error on the part of the interviewer "Caliban." But it is significant that Griffing speaks for active Ohio abolitionists, who had special reason for distinguishing between active

and inactive, sincere and insincere, antislavery partisans. Moreover, Griffing lacked family or other personal ties with Brown, such as prejudiced Professor James C. Malin against other witnesses to Brown's antislavery fervor in Ohio. Griffing's testimony respecting John Brown's antislavery proclivities, therefore, becomes a substantial part of the Ohio record:

JOHN BROWN'S MEN

An Old Associate of Theirs in the Anti-Slavery Movement

Relates Some New Facts About Them.

Special Correspondence of the Enquirer

COLUMBUS, June 17, 1879.

I lately met one of the old band of Ohio Liberators, or Liberty men, as they preferred to call themselves—the men who, twenty-five or thirty years ago, helped to manage the underground railroad between slavery and freedom, or, geographically speaking, between Kentucky and Virginia soil and Canada.

This gentleman was Mr. Charles S. S. Griffing, now of Pittsburg, formerly, however, of Columbiana County. I had known him for many years, but either his modesty or my stupidity had never brought out the fact that he was an historical character in having been one of the small band of original Abolitionist [*sic*] who fought slavery on the hustings as far back as 1844 when Birney was a candidate for the Presidency against Henry Clay on the anti-slavery principle. He is an intelligent man of sixty, perhaps, and the way having been once opened to reminiscence he becomes one of the most interesting talkers I ever met. He fought the anti-slavery battles of those days along with Parker Pillsbury, William Lloyd Garrison, John and Oliver Brown, Sojourner Truth, and a score of others whose names are not lost from history.

THE PIONEERS OF THE MOVEMENT

"Ours was a little band in those days," said Mr. Griffing, "but we stuck well together, and kept fighting for the right as we viewed it. And we had the satisfaction of seeing it triumph in the end."

"Did you know John Brown personally?"

"Very well. He was one of our band long before he went to Kansas, and while he was living out there he often came back to the Reserve. I remember one time he came back with a horse⁸ that he had 'taken' he called it, though stolen others would have said, from a pro-slavery man in Missouri. That horse was sold at auction on the street in Cleveland. There was no attempt to keep secret how he got it. It was perfectly understood that the money he got for it was to help old John in his fight then against the Border Ruffians in Kansas."

"What is your estimate of Old John Brown?"

"He was as brave a man as ever drew breath. He was eccentric, but not crazy. He had a consuming idea in life, and that was to free the black man. He had no other aim. When we used to campaign through the Reserve, we had two kinds of men—men of words and men of action. Parker Pillsbury was a man of words; no man who ever lived could speak more bitterly of the cause of slavery or eloquently of freedom than he. John Brown was a man of action; no one would brave greater perils or incur more

risks to lead a black man from slavery to freedom than he. I've seen him come in at night with [a] gang of five or six blacks that he had piloted all the way from the river, hide them away in the stables maybe, or the garret, and if anybody was following he would keep them stowed away for weeks. He would appear on the streets without saying a word to any one about it. But let any slaveholder discover the whereabouts of his charges and attempt to take them back, and he would fight like a lion.

JOHN BROWN'S PLAN OF CAMPAIGN

"What of his military abilities?"

"I think he hadn't much of military ability. He had seen the rough and tumble of pioneer life and knew what it was to fight from every point. But still he didn't know anything of the science of war. He got a lot of pikes made down at Troy, New York. Of what account could they be to him? Pikes are a weapon of a former generation, and a darky would be just as formidable with a pitchfork in his hand as a pike. But still his campaign is not so chimerical as many people think. You see, he was was [*sic*] forced to make his move on Harper's Ferry a week sooner than he had intended to. He hadn't fixed up his arrangement with the blacks yet and he was driven like a rat into a hole there at Harper's Ferry. His original plan was to move with his force down the Blue Ridge, giving the slaves their freedom as he went along, and adding the men to his little army. He intended to make a track South about thirty miles wide, running right through to salt water; then with that to start from, he would move both east and west, gathering in the slaves, but killing none of the whites unless he had to."

"When did you see John Brown last before his execution?"

"He was out in Ashtabula County. I think it was in April or May of that year, 1858 [1859]; then he was up in Portage County some time in the summer. That was the last time I saw him alive."

"Did you know others of his band?"

"Yes, several of them. I knew Realf, who was their Secretary of State, as he was called. I knew the Coppic⁹ brothers, both of them. One escaped, but the other was hanged, and after he was hanged we brought his body back to Columbiana County, where they had lived, and buried it at Salem. Never have I seen, before or since, a funeral where there was such a crowd or so much feeling. His grave is marked by a monument now."¹⁰

JOHN BROWN'S FAMILY

"Did you know other members of the Brown family, Mr. Griffing? I have been told that all of them were extraordinary characters?"

"Yes, I knew them well. His son John, who now lives at Put-in-Bay, is much like his father in resolution and taciturnity. Own [*sic*] Brown, the one who used to be on Jay Cooke's Island, was wounded and taken prisoner in the Kansas troubles. He had to endure a great deal of suffering, and I expect it injured him somewhat. But there was a brother of old John- that was Oliver- who was a strange character."

"Was he an Abolitionist, too?"

"Oh, yes. They were all Liberty men. Oliver was the most original, perhaps, of them all. He used to live up in Geauga County. He burned a pulpit there once, I very well remember."

"How was that?"¹¹

"Well, it was in the country there, and at the time we were making our anti-slavery fight. Oliver had got a big farm and on one corner of it a little church had been built for neighborhood worship. It was really on his land as no deed had ever been made transferring it to the little congregation who worshiped there. The church people were not disposed to share it with us Abolitionists on equal terms, though it was built with the understanding that it should be for joint use. One Sunday afternoon we had arranged to have an anti-slavery meeting there, and when we arrived we found the preacher holding forth. Oliver Brown didn't like this, and asked the preacher to vacate, but he wouldn't do it. Then we went out in the yard and held our meeting, and soon had most of the congregation with us. The preacher announced that he would preach again next Sunday, but Oliver determined he shouldn't. So during the week he ran a fence around it, a rail fence, not very high, but still high enough to turn stock. Sunday morning he was the first man to get in the church. He took with him a basketful of bowlders and two or three good clubs and prepared to hold the fort. About ten o'clock the congregation began to arrive in their wagons and buggies. When they saw that fence they commenced to get mad, and it wasn't five minutes before it was swept away. But when they got to the door it was locked. Going around to the window they saw Oliver in there, with hymn-book in hand, marching up and down the aisle singing: "Far from my Thoughts Vain World Begone." They called to him to let them in but he took no notice of them. Then they commenced to batter away at the door, when he with a loud voice warned them to leave him alone, that he was worshiping in his own house and his own way and would not be disturbed. Still they tried to get in, but he pointed to his armament of clubs and stone, and they stopped for the time. In the afternoon, however, they got into the church, and that made Oliver so mad he vowed he would burn the pulpit 'with fire and brim-stone.' The next day, toward sunset, I came along there, and sure enough he had loosened the pulpit from the floor and dragged it out in the yard, and was just about to set fire to it. Several of the neighbors had gathered there, but none of them were willing to have a difficulty with Oliver, and he set it on fire. While it was burning, a little old man who felt wrought up by it brought out the pulpit Bible and asked him why he didn't burn it as well. 'If you want to burn your Bible, neighbor, just throw it in there,' replied Oliver; 'but I won't do it, because I have nothing against the Bible. If it will give you any comfort, just throw it on.' After he had burned the pulpit we had no more trouble about getting the use of the church. They had preaching there and we had our anti-slavery meetings, but there was no conflict afterward."

I could go on with many more anecdotes of the Brown family, as told by Mr. Griffing, but space will not permit at this time.

CALIBAN

1 James C. Malin, *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-six* (Philadelphia, 1942).

See also Robert P. Warren, *John Brown; the Making of a Martyr* (New York, 1930), in which the psychological approach is maintained to Brown's detriment.

2 Charles B. Galbreath "John Brown" and "Anti-slavery Movement in Columbiana County," *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, XXX (1921), 184-289; 355-396. A variety of other material connecting John Brown to antislavery in Ohio makes this volume of particular value; the reference to it made further on in the

present writing does not exhaust its pertinent contents. Miss Land's article, though involving original research, is not always careful with respect to details. Thus, she repeats the story that Missouri offered a reward of \$3,000 for Brown's capture, a story which seems to have been decisively refuted by Floyd C. Shoemaker. See his "John Brown's Missouri Raid," *Missouri Historical Review*, XXVI (1931-32) 78-82.

3 The Malin analysis is particularly long and exhaustive, and there is reason to fear that not all students who are presumed to have an acquaintance with it have trudged its weary road to the end. A brief summary of its method and conclusions with respect to Brown may be found in Malin, *Essays on Historiography* (Lawrence, Kans., 1946), 153 *et seq.*

4 Henry D. Thoreau, *Writings* (Riverside ed., 10 vols., Cambridge, 1894), X, 234.

5 The sketch of her career in the *Dictionary of American Biography* is based upon scanty passages in Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others, *History of Woman Suffrage* (3 vols., Rochester, 1881-87) and several other works, as well as family information.

6 For material relating to their joint careers, see the Griffing Scrapbooks, Manuscript Division, Columbia University Library. In 1854, Griffing was involved in the Salem Rescue, described in Galbreath, "Anti-slavery Movement in Columbiana County," 380 *et seq.*

7 See his *Christianity Not a Temperance Religion. Jesus of Nazareth Did Not Institute the Eucharist, Nor Make Wine at a Wedding Feast. A New Departure by the Church Necessary and Practical. As Maintained in an Address by C. S. S. Griffing, at Columbus, Ohio, July 26th, 1876* (Columbus, 1879).

8 Should be "horses." The incident occurred in the spring of 1859.

9 The interviewer consistently misspelled "Coppoc."

10 The interviewer here interjected a reminiscence by someone else respecting Barclay Coppoc, who escaped, which does not bear on the subject and appears obviously apocryphal. The paragraph is therefore not reproduced here.

11 The incident is substantiated in a letter by John Brown, Jr., to Frank B. Sanborn, dated January 8, 1884, which is in the possession of Mr. Boyd B. Stutler, an authority on John Brown. The present writer wishes to acknowledge the courtesy of Mr. Stutler in sending him a copy of this letter, as well as in providing stimulating suggestions and ideas.