Accompanying America's troubled attempt to cope with the existence of slavery in its past is the examination and interpretation of those figures who broke widely-accepted moral and legal codes in order to hasten the end of the “peculiar institution.” Perhaps no other American figure presents as complex and difficult a persona for historians to interpret as the famous abolitionist John Brown, known for his part in leading the murder of proslavery settlers in Kansas as well as his leadership of the insurrection at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

In time for the sesquicentennial of the Harpers Ferry incident, David Reynolds has written an excellent interpretative cultural biography of Brown which attempts to reevaluate the abolitionist. Moving away from former studies on Brown, Reynolds attempts to take into context the events of the time and perhaps more importantly, what he considers Brown's “Puritan” heritage. As Reynolds notes, previous biographies either label Brown as a faultless hero deserving of sainthood or a fanatic whose sanity must be questioned, lending much importance to this new, more balanced work.

This “Puritan” heritage, which at first might seem to be merely a simplistic indication of Brown's Calvinism and piety, is explained through the first chapters of Reynolds’ work. Reynolds successfully builds the case for historians to consider Brown and his father Owen as “Puritan,” tying back not only to the Massachusetts Bay Colony (to which the family claimed ancestry), but to the English Civil War and the figure of Oliver Cromwell. (164-165) The reader, through Reynolds’ narrative, may find Brown to be a sort of anomaly upon the period's religious landscape. Unlike his contemporaries, he did not seem to be swayed by the theological trends moving away from Calvinism, which affected how he later considered his role in history. Reynolds’ work skillfully sketches the life of Brown as an individual who fell outside of popular religious persuasions. Perhaps this lack of categorization explains the “uncomfortable” nature by which historians have considered Brown.

Reynolds’ major argument - and a core point of controversy - lies in the assertion that Brown's violence stimulated the outbreak of the Civil War. While this fact cannot be denied, it is Reynolds’ suggestion that Brown sparked the war at the “right time” which has stirred the scholarly realm in recent years. Reynolds claims Brown as “a positive agent for change,” (443) noting that the Civil War was inevitable in the nation’s history. Brown, Reynolds suggests, sparked the Civil War as a conflict over slavery before the nation’s population or access to technology doubled or perhaps even tripled the amount killed at the battlefields of Antietam, Shiloh, or Gettysburg. (442)

Reynolds’ work is an important contribution, especially considering the author’s ability to consider cultural influences in the life of a controversial figure. While the author is certainly partial toward his subject, his bias comes from careful historical analysis of a difficult figure to examine. Reynolds successfully interprets Brown through a thorough examination of major cultural, political, and personal issues present in the abolitionist’s life.