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John Brown Photo Chronology: Catalog of the Exhibition at Harpers Ferry 2009

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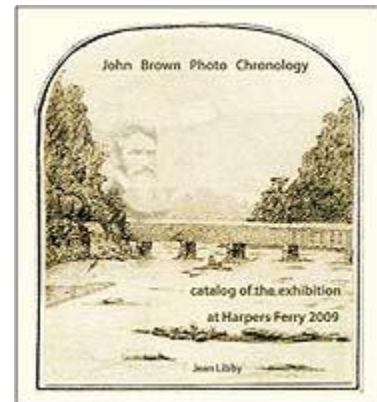
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Book Review

Jean Libby. *John Brown Photo Chronology: Catalog of the Exhibition at Harpers Ferry 2009*. Allies for Freedom Publishers, Palo Alto, CA, 2009. 96 pp. with b&w and color illustrations, portraits, references, 8 x 10 format (paper), ISBN 978-0977363872.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archeology Newsletter by Teresa S. Moyer



John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 constituted one event that brought American debate to a head via the Civil War, and his story continues to be relevant today. Jean Libby's past research into Brown and Harpers Ferry has shaped and challenged the ways that scholars and the public perceived his insurrectionist work and activism for African Americans. Her recent publication on John Brown is the catalog that accompanies a photographic exhibition on permanent display at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. The exhibit also traveled to the National Archives and Records Administration in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and other locations. The catalog focuses on images of Brown by way of daguerreotypes, albumen and sepia prints, painted photographs, engravings, and other representations of Brown, his family, and places and people associated with his efforts. The images illustrate a series of essays by Libby and other authors on elements of Brown's actions and their significance in American history. Together, the images and essays demonstrate the importance of photography in John Brown's crusade to end African American slavery in the United States.

Libby's catalog reflects her work to locate and analyze primary visual sources of Brown portraiture. The images of Brown date from 1848 to 1858, the decade of the Fugitive Slave Law, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Dred Scott decision. A few additional images were printed posthumously from earlier prints. Together, they track Brown's changing appearance over the course of his work to advance the abolishment of slavery and the advancement of African American freedom from young man to iconic bearded insurrectionist. Their number and timing reflect Brown's awareness of the effect of his image and its potential to recruit and promote the cause of abolition. Brown carried copies of his portraits for distribution. No photographs of Brown from 1859 have been located, only his commissions of reproductions. When appropriate, the reverse sides of images are

reproduced to show handwritten captions. The captions accompanying the images include the photographer, medium, year, purpose of the image in production or reproduction, and other pertinent information. On occasion, text or captions are superimposed over images, which is unusual for a catalog of a photographic exhibition because it obscures the original composition. All the images in the book, nonetheless, are high-quality reproductions printed on semi-gloss paper. The attention paid to printing makes the book a useful compilation for Brown scholars.

Additional images in the catalog include modern scenes from Harpers Ferry, descendants of John Brown, historians, places beyond Harper Ferry that are associated with Brown, and gravestones. Two images of the exhibit are included. The location of one is not identified, but the other is of the exhibit on travel to a workshop. It would be interesting to see more of the exhibit in context, particularly at Harpers Ferry, because exhibition catalogs are as much a record of an exhibit as they are of the exhibit contents.

The scope of images included in the catalog could be expanded to improve the visual historical context for readers, particularly those who focus on African American history and archaeology rather than John Brown. The catalog focuses on photographs, but also includes a few drawings or engravings. Considering their inclusion, I wondered why the iconic images of Brown and Harpers Ferry were not included in the catalog, such as the burning of the armory and Brown's execution, for the reader's information. Modern scenes of Brown-associated buildings are in the catalog, but not images from the archaeological excavations around the arsenal and armory or artifacts taken from those excavations. For archaeological readers of this newsletter, in particular, such images would intersect with activist archaeologies and provide visual evidence of past social activism. More images of nineteenth-century African Americans would also be useful to readers. Libby includes only Frederick Douglass as a contemporaneous African American to Brown. The inclusion of nineteenth-century scenes of enslaved persons at home, in fields, or with their families would provide needed information about the conditions against which, and the people for whom, Brown set his cause. Libby does include a map of nearby plantations and buildings associated with slavery, but they cannot impart the conditions in which people lived as can historical images. Images of the raid-in-action, Brown's hanging, and of enslaved persons would help modern readers who are unfamiliar with the history of the era or the breadth of sources available to scholars.

The essays in *John Brown Photo Chronology* provide context on the history represented in the images and the images themselves. The strength of the text is its discussion of the facts surrounding John Brown and his cause. Quotes from

well-known and lesser-known historical figures highlight the ideology behind Brown's work. Libby's essays communicate details about Brown's travels and his life, as well as explanations about the history of the images themselves -- information about the photographers, the technology, and the social context of photography in the mid-nineteenth century. In addition, Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. addresses Brown's increasing militancy upon his return to Ohio circa 1851-1855 from the northeast. Brown's familiarity with black leaders and communities in the northeast, along with the threat of the Fugitive Slave Act, inspired his expanding work to associate with African Americans to abolish slavery and bring fugitives from slavery into free states. A separate essay by DeCaro focuses on his work as biographer of Clarence S. Gee, a collector of Brown images and documents. Hannah N. Geffert looks at the influence of the Dred Scott case on Brown. She outlines its impact on Brown's development of a governmental framework for liberated slaves. Judy Sweets discusses the Underground Railroad in Kansas. Brown assisted escaped persons as an escort. Sweets also contributes an essay on Brown's history and the collections in historical societies, archives, and museums in Kansas. Libby compiles biographies of the photographers into an essay at the back of the book. Together, the essays provide an overview of key people and events surrounding Brown's work. It would have been helpful to have essays on the historical circumstances facing blacks in America during the mid-nineteenth century, beyond the Underground Railroad, as context for Brown's activism.

The strengths of text and imagery are complicated by the organization and design of the catalog. Attribution of the essays is inconsistent in the main body of the catalog such that the reader must frequently flip to the table of contents to identify the author. Some passages are clearly attributed to authors other than Libby, but oftentimes where those passages end and Libby's begin is unclear. The reader must flip between the front matter and the main text for guidance. The images often, but not always, have captions immediately with them, but they may also have additional information in captions on the opposite page. Where citations and captions begin or end amid the main text is often difficult to discern. As a result, the reader must put in some work to understand the structure of the book, the relationships of its components, and the authorship of the content.

The point of *John Brown Photo Chronology* is that the technical medium of photography -- its lifelike reproduction of human subjects as well as its reproducibility -- provided John Brown with a tool to promote his cause with his likeness as a symbol. The book is of interest to Brown scholars, as well as students of the history of photography. Despite problems with the organization

and design of the book, its contents provide readers with the ability to look at the person associated with some of the most important events of nineteenth-century African