

John Brown, Slavery, and the Legacies of Revolutionary Violence in Our Own Time: A Conference Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the Harpers Ferry Raid

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William Lloyd Garrison, Nonviolent Abolitionists, and John Brown

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Abstract

Historians of abolitionism in general and of John Brown in particular have often drawn a sharp distinction between Brown, who used violent means to attack slavery, and other abolitionists, like William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott, and Wendell Phillips, who abjured the use of violence either for principled or practical reasons. That distinction between “violent” and “nonviolent” abolitionism survives in the history and memory of the abolitionist movement partly because it was a distinction sometimes drawn by abolitionists themselves, both before and after the Harper’s Ferry raid. Yet there are good reasons to challenge this polarized picture of the abolitionist movement, as a comparison of William Lloyd Garrison and John Brown makes clear. Without underestimating the real disagreements and differences between these two abolitionists and their followers, it is important to note the *similarities* between their views about slavery and the relative legitimacy of different kinds of violence, the *symbiotic* relationship between Garrison’s nonviolent tactics and Brown’s violent ones, and the *sympathy* of Garrison and many of his followers for Brown after the Harper’s Ferry raid—a sympathy that

arose from and helps reveal that similarity and symbiosis. One way to begin to appreciate these points is to notice the fact that abolitionists who had long been aligned with Garrison's nonviolent abolitionist tactics--like Wendell Phillips, James Miller McKim, Irish abolitionist Richard D. Webb, and Garrison himself--often took leading roles in the commemoration and celebration of Brown after his capture and execution.