

THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

NOVEMBER, 1910

JOHN BROWN FIFTY YEARS AFTER

A REVIEW BY WILLIAM P. TRENT

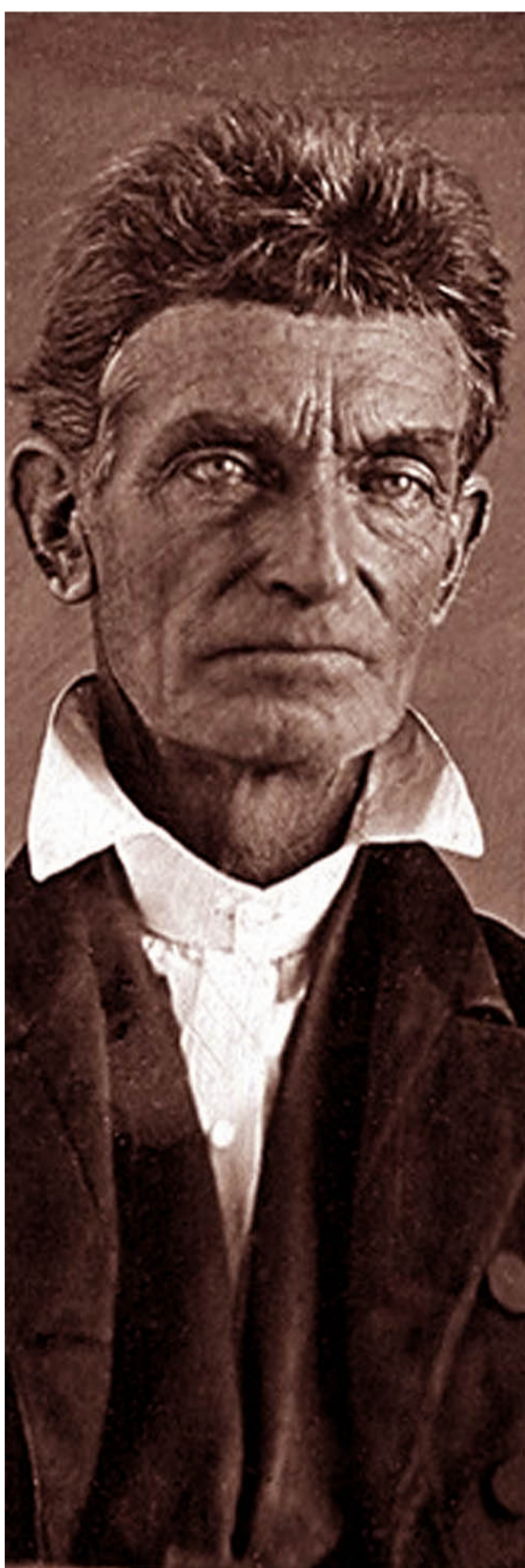
FULLY to estimate the value of Mr. Oswald Garrison Villard's "John Brown, 1800-1859, A Biography Fifty Years After" (Houghton, Mifflin Co.), must be the task of specialists, but even a single rapid reading suffices, I think, to convince one that we have in the thick volume an unusually thorough and scholarly and—what is more important—a remarkably impartial work. That the book will make certain Americans see in John Brown a spiritual hero, or cause other Americans to desist from seeing in him a sort of demigod is too much to hope; but it is surely permissible to expect that many Americans will find in this biography a gratifying proof of the ameliorating effects of time upon political passions, and that they will ungrudgingly express their gratitude to the author for his eminent services in behalf of the truth of history, that greatest of reconcilers.

The text of the book consists of 589 large pages. Then follow 66 pages of notes, an appendix of documents, a careful bibliography, and a good index. This would not furnish what is known as light reading, even if the author sacrificed in a second edition some of that wealth of details which will constitute in the eyes of students not a small part of the book's value. I am inclined to doubt whether he would have been wise had he compressed his narrative even in its more gruesome and homely details, and I have nothing but praise for his firm and skilful handling of his material, much of which is new. The record is voluminous, but the subject is worthy of the pains that have been bestowed upon it; and I suspect that Mr. Villard's spirit of impartiality, to which again all praise, is inextricably bound up with his spirit of thoroughness.



J O H N B R O W N

The narrative proper is divided into fifteen chapters, the first two of which cover Brown's checkered and interesting life before he went to Kansas in 1855. His unsatisfactory, not to say shiftless, career in business is told without the least effort to minimize his faults, but Mr. Villard properly makes use of an important letter from Brown to an opponent, Amos Chamberlain, which seems to go far toward relieving the former of any real odium in connection with his business misfortunes. Of the five chapters devoted to the struggle in Kansas throughout 1856 the crucial one is that entitled "Murder on the Pottawatomie."

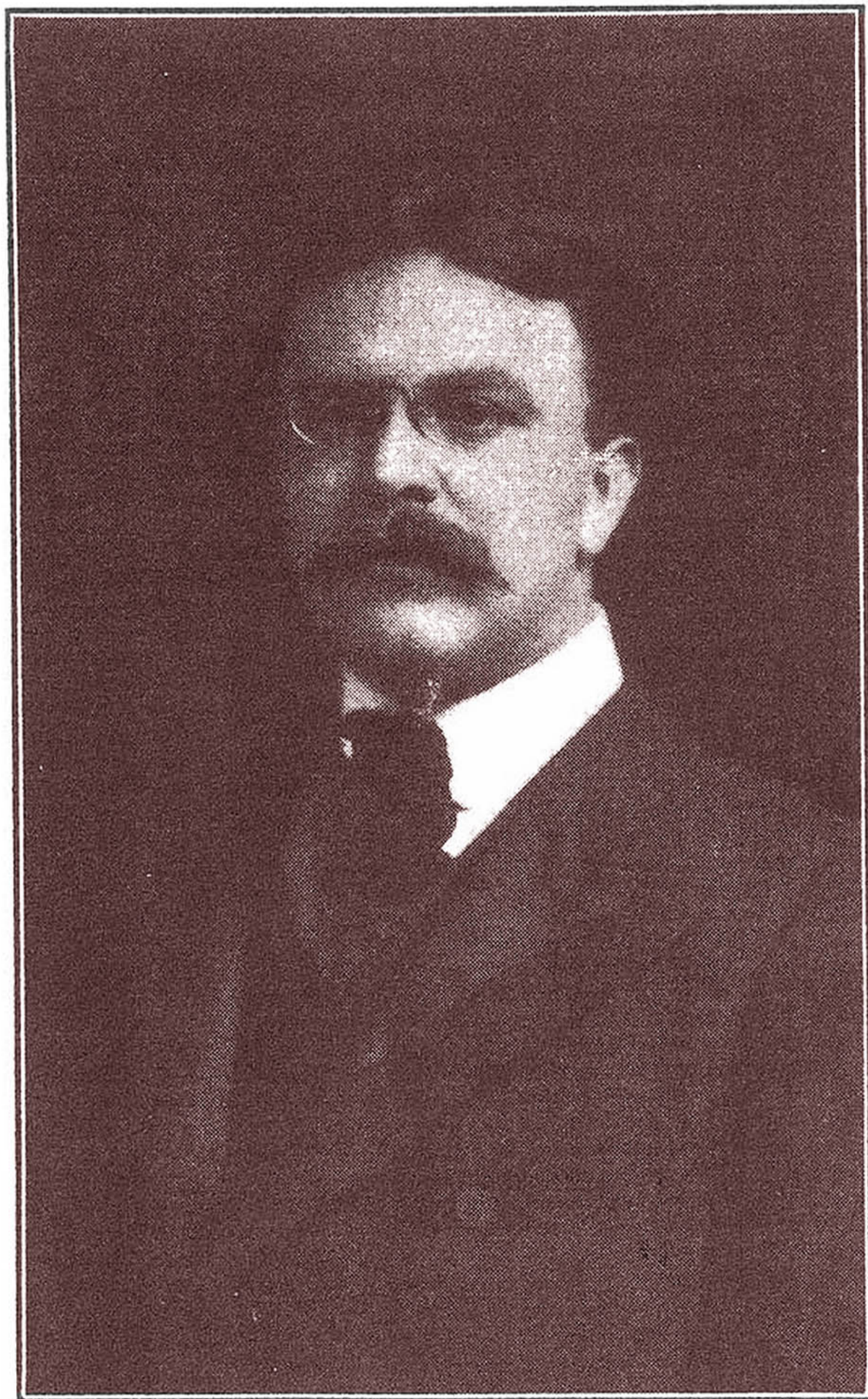


Mr. Villard's resolute handling of Brown's terrible crime is to me the most impressive feature of the book. "For John Brown," he writes, "no pleas can be made that will enable him to escape coming before the bar of historical judgment. There his wealth of self-sacrifice and the nobility of his aims do not avail to prevent a complete condemnation of his bloody crime at Pottawatomie, or a just penalty for his taking human life without warrant or authority. If he deserves to live in history, it is not because of his cruel, gruesome, reprehensible acts on the Pottawatomie, but despite them." These words suffice to prove that Mr. Villard is a biographer and not a partisan. The reading of his entire chapter may be recommended to such analytically minded persons as may wish to determine the precise thinness of the veneer of civilization that keeps under whatever of the primitive barbarian survives within them.

Four more chapters bring us to one entitled "The Eve of the Tragedy," that is to say, bring us in sight of Harper's Ferry. These chapters may flag in interest, but they do not flag in merit. Perhaps, as a Southern-born man, I may be permitted, without offense, to wish that in his carefully detailed account of Brown's relations with his Northern sympathizers Mr. Villard had thought it well to put some searching questions with regard to the extent of the intercourse citizens may allow themselves to have with persons for whose capture the chief executive of the nation has offered a reward; but, after all, I am not sure that such questions would have done any more good than a set of questions I could easily frame with regard to the conduct of some eminent Southerners of Brown's period, and I let the point pass, especially as no one could ask Mr. Villard to be more impartial than he is in his discussion of the effects of the capture and trial at Harper's Ferry upon some of Brown's staunchest upholders.

John Brown

As for the five chapters that discuss the heroic but forlorn sally, the capture of the engine-house, the trial of Brown, his noble bearing, the public tension, the execution and its dire consequences, there is scarcely a touch in them that seems out of place, and they constitute an impressive close of an impressive book. "It was the weapon of the spirit by which he finally conquered," writes Mr. Villard. "In its power lies not only the secret of his influence, and his immortality, but the finest ethical teachings of a life which, for all its faults, inculcates many an enduring lesson, and will forever make its appeal to the imagination." True words surely, yet one is left wondering how far, in making our heroes, we ought to dissociate the aims of the spirit from the deeds of the body, and how in a jarring world we can continue to make all our deeds square in all men's eyes with the Golden Rule. One man is inspired by seeing in his imagination "the Charlestown gallows that became a cross"; another is saddened by beholding a somber specter standing by that gallows extending a threatening finger over a doomed land. In the half century that has elapsed most men have rubbed their eyes energetically, and no specter now disturbs their vision; but some still see it. A truce, however, to such remarks. It is the truth that frees us from specters and most other evils, and it is books like Mr. Villard's that help on the cause of truth. Its dispassioned readers are not likely to agree with Emerson that its subject was "the rarest of heroes," but they will sympathize the more with unselfish aspirations, and they will have a clearer insight into the complexities of life and character.



OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD

(Author of the most complete biography of John Brown)