

John Brown's Raid & Space Ships Dot an Alternative History

Book review

RB

2019

a review of

Fire on the Mountain by Terry Bisson. PM Press, 2009

Forget *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Lincoln was wrong or disingenuous when he told Harriet Beecher Stowe that her novel brought on the Civil War. The Slavocracy was not frightened by mawkish sentiment.

No, it was rifle-toting abolitionist zealots willing to die that caused Southern panic.

On October 16, 1859, John Brown led twenty-two anti-slavery militants in seizing a US arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, intending to spark a slave revolt. It was a signal event that indicated some Northern abolitionists were no longer willing to compromise. War soon followed.

Slaves had previously carried arms against white supremacy during the War of 1812, when 3,600 liberated Southern chattel saw service as British marines.

These black battalions fought against slaver militias in Virginia, Maryland and Georgia. Insurgent slaves also used firearms against slavers during aborted revolts like Nat Turner's murderous defiance of 1831.

What changed in the mid-19th century was that frustrated Euro-American abolitionists also picked up the gun. These white freedom fighters first appeared in Kansas in 1856, then Virginia in 1859. In the 1860s, they formed a blue army that marched across the South and killed slavery dead.

Veteran science fiction author Terry Bisson uses Harpers Ferry as his launching pad to create a world where John Brown's raid does not fail, but instead ignites a successful slave insurrection. Nova Africa is the result, a predominantly black nation constructed from former Southern states.

We learn about its great 19th Century revolution through contemporary letters studied by a 1950s Nova Africa historian. They indicate that Harriet Tubman and Fredrick Douglass joined Brown in Appalachia to lead escaped slaves in a desperate guerrilla struggle.

In the book's most moving passage, John Brown—now called "Old Shenandoah" Brown—dies a warrior's death with Tubman by his side. Like Crazy Horse, he is laid to rest in an unknown location. "Every Appalachian peak is his grave."

Jump to the 1950s. Socialist Nova Africa stands at the pinnacle of technological achievement. Plasma motors push microwave-guided airships through the sky, and skilled technicians prepare to launch a manned rocket to Mars.

Only nature-raping empires have an outer-space capacity, so by transitive logic, Nova Africa is an ecological nightmare. She would have spearheaded The Great Acceleration, an exponential increase of industrial CO₂ output after World War II.

As far as Gaia is concerned then, utopian Nova Africa and the actual USA are two toxic sponge-mops drawn from the same rack. Ethnic and political differences aside, to Mother Earth they are both simply more industrial shit to absorb.

This nasty characteristic of all mechanized states is not mentioned by Bisson. The author may well intend his fantasy to be more about race than spaceships, but then why include the spaceships?

Clearly, it is to invoke a standard leftist trope of industrialism as liberating. Bisson, the sci-fi guy, cannot resist applying a high-tech sheen to illustrate how clever his utopians are. He obviously worships technological power and gives little import to the ecocide it causes.

He simply wishes that the workers controlled production.

Committing an even worse sin, the author keeps alive classic misinformation about the Harpers Ferry raid. His narrative asserts that few slaves initially joined Brown's raiders, perpetuating Virginia propaganda from 1859. Unfortunately, Bisson has a lot of company in this slander, as it has been adopted by modern historians. However, it is demonstratively false.

Surviving African-American raider Osborne Anderson wrote in 1860 that dozens of local slaves participated in the Harpers Ferry mutiny. He penned his account immediately after the raid, in direct response to fake news from Virginia about contented chattel who refused to join Brown's men.

Anderson answered by listing several insurgent slaves by name in his book, and others by description.

While this inclusion may be ethically questionable, no slave suffered punishment for it. (After the raid failed, all surviving slaves who had participated insisted that they were kidnapped, and their masters chose to believe them.) Anderson's worst fear was that Virginia disinformation that depicted slaves as too apathetic or cowardly to fight for their own freedom would become enshrined as permanent history. This is exactly what happened.

James Redpath and Richard Hinton, Jayhawkers who rode with Brown in Kansas to make that state free, both supported Anderson's assertions in 19th Century books they wrote on the raid.

A century later, historian Jean Libby further validated Anderson with an exhaustive analysis of her own. She calibrated Anderson's story with other eye-witnesses, and uncovered contemporary newspaper accounts from the first days after the raid that mentioned slave participation, before a "no slaves joined in" story had cemented itself in the public mind.

She also researched local African-American oral and written history that contained similar hidden information about slave militancy.

Finally, Libby resolved a small number of factual and chronological errors in Anderson's book that have been used by his enemies to invalidate the narrative. Anderson wrote his account in haste, immediately after the raid and one step ahead of the hangman. Fact-checking was difficult. Libby's 1979 resolution of all lingering questions fully rehabilitated his story and reputation.

Crucially, Anderson and Hinton both assert that Brown sparked off the Harpers Ferry uprising a week early due to fear of the plan's exposure. This could explain why even more slaves did not join in, and why Brown stayed put at the arsenal as if expecting help to arrive.

As it was, Hinton and other militants were on their way to Brown's Maryland staging area to join him when news of the raid broke on October 17.

Years later, Anderson informed Hinton that at least 150 slaves had been advised of an October 23 start date, probably by black raider Dangerfield Newby, a former Virginia slave who knew plantation rhythms and moved easily among them. Like Hinton, these potential slave reinforcements were caught off guard by the early move.

Returning to Bisson's novel, he portrays modern Nova Africa as hyper-industrialized, which is never satisfactorily explained beyond the self-evident benefits of socialism.

The actual Industrial Revolution emerged from thousands of tinkering millwrights financed by Big Capital from England and New England. Nova Africa had none of this.

The Cuban experience of the 1960s shows that a population can greatly expand its professional knowledge within a generation, but what about the money? From where did Nova Africa accumulate her primitive capital? Did she super-exploit some colony? Did she designate a class of citizens as kulaks and loot them?

Bisson leaves this unexplained. His Nova Africa enjoys all the benefits of deep industrialization without agonizing over prerequisite crimes against nature and humanity that must occur to occupy such a position.

In another very conventional choice, Bisson equates space travel with national merit. Lewis Mumford saw it differently. During the giddy era of Apollo moon missions, this dissenting public intellectual noted that “space exploration by manned rockets enlarges and intensifies all the main components of the power system: increased energy, accelerated motion, automation, cybernation, instant communication, remote control.”

This is Bisson’s utopia: a technocratic mega-state that valorizes total domination of nature.

As for microwave airships running on plasma engines, they require a lot of biological death to exist. The best science fiction issues a statement about the real world, and *Fire on the Mountain* was an opportunity for Bisson to explore fantasy alternatives to our upcoming extinction by industrialization. Instead we get just another mechanized empire committing biocide to produce shiny toys. The difference is that African-Americans control it.

Bisson calls Nova Africa socialist, but China and Cuba define themselves similarly and are rigid hierarchies with large prison populations. Coercive socialism resides comfortably with capitalism, communism and fascism at the far end of the authoritarian vs. anti-authoritarian spectrum.

The actual events of Harpers Ferry stand on their own. *Fire on the Mountain* could have better honored Brown’s sacrifice by creating new characters inspired by him to ignite a triumphant slave revolt. After that, their progeny could resist industrialization and embrace a non-hierarchical social revolution that celebrates humanity as part of nature. After all, it’s fiction.

Instead, Bisson’s version of a successful Harpers Ferry raid leads to ever more industrialism. He intended this as a happy ending, but I disagree.

RB lives in Dearborn, Michigan where he is raising two kids and their four kidneys, just in case.



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