

# slavery and *the santa fe trail*

or, john brown  
on hollywood's  
sour apple tree

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Robert Morsberger's essay was intended for the special *festschrift* number (xvi, 2) marking Alexander Kern's retirement. We publish it here with this headnote because, though it became ready for publication too late to make that issue, we're happy to go on honoring Alex.

The furor after the publication of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1967 demonstrates the intensity of our reactions to Afro-American history in general and to slave insurrections in particular. Americans are being made aware of the insurrections of Cato, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and the revolt aboard the *Amistad*; and Stanley Elkins's theory that slavery reduced blacks in America to passive "sambos" is being challenged. For the most part the insurrectionists are now hailed as heroic freedom fighters whose violence was justified as prisoners of war trying to escape from or overthrow their captors. The complex ambiguity of Styron's treatment of Nat Turner, even though the novel is an ironic indictment of slavery, so angered black militants that they stopped the production of a movie version of the book.

From this perspective, it may be profitable to look back and examine the one major Hollywood film that did deal at length with the issue of American slave insurrection. This is Warner Brothers', *The Santa Fe Trail*, a popular hit of 1940. The film is of considerable interest as a vehicle of popular culture, embodying some of the confusions and prejudices of the pre-civil rights era; and as it is still shown frequently on television, its propaganda, dated though it is, may continue to influence audiences.

It also makes a provocative contrast to the only other film that dramatizes a slave insurrection, Universal-International's 1960 epic, *Spartacus*, which reflects some of the conflicts of the cold war and of McCarthyism. This story of the gladiator who threatened the tyranny of Rome had symbolized for centuries the revolutionary fervor of oppressed peoples trying to establish freedom. In the twentieth century, it was used both by Communists to attack so-called capitalist colonialism and by anti-Communists to criticize the Iron Curtain. Kirk Douglas, producer and star of the film, determined to use it to break the Hollywood blacklist that denied employment to those in the entertainment field who were suspected of subversive activities or who refused to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee. In defiance, Douglas hired blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo to do a scenario from a novel by ex-Communist Howard Fast. Trumbo had revived his career by writing under a pseudonym, but Douglas insisted on giving him credit under his own name. This effectively broke the blacklist and helped pull the motion picture industry out of the mire of McCarthyism.

Although *Spartacus* was committed to liberalism, it was also a \$12,000,000 investment inspired by and competing to match the recent boxoffice success of *Ben-Hur*. Consequently, it settled for spectacular entertainment, and its liberalism was confined to generalized statements against tyranny and in favor of freedom and equality that no one could find objectionable. Set in the ancient world, it avoided specific references to current crises, and the fact that all but one of its protagonists were white kept it from having any direct connection with the American civil rights movement that was just moving into full gear. However, one of the most moving scenes is that in which a black gladiator who defeats Spartacus in the arena refuses to kill him when the audience signal thumbs down and instead, with a strangled cry of rage, tries to kill the dictator Crassus, only to die in the attempt. Black militants might protest at his sacrificing his life for a white man, but friends of freedom would find catharsis in his defiance of dictatorship; civil rights proponents would admire his courage. In contrast, *The Santa Fe Trail* is distinctly opposed to revolutionary violence, partially apologetic for slavery and patronizing towards blacks.

*The Santa Fe Trail* has an intentionally misleading title; it was produced as an adventure vehicle for Errol Flynn, who had just made a hit in two Westerns, *Dodge City* and *Virginia City*, and so the title suggests another Western following the formula of its predecessors. In fact, *The Santa Fe Trail* is about John Brown in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry. Only a few minutes of the film deal with the Santa Fe Trail, the connection being that Flynn and his fellow cavalry officers are to protect the railroad being built from Kansas to Santa Fe, when they encounter Brown and his band.

The screenplay is by Robert Buckner, who did the scenario for *Dodge*

*City* and *Virginia City* and was, by the time of *The Santa Fe Trail*, skilled at writing for the Warner repertory team of Flynn, Olivia de Havilland, Alan Hale, and Guinn (Big Boy) Williams. Buckner also wrote such diverse films as *The Oklahoma Kid*, *Knute Rockne*, *Dive Bomber*, and *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, and then turned producer of *Gentleman Jim*, *Uncertain Glory*, *San Antonio* (three more Flynn vehicles), *Mission to Moscow*, *Life With Father*, and others, after which he returned to script writing with *To Paris With Love* (an Alec Guinness comedy), *Love Me Tender* (Elvis Presley's debut), and *From Hell to Texas*. Most of these are competent, slick entertainments.

Equally competent and slick is *The Santa Fe Trail*, except that Buckner tried, for a change, to deal with a significant issue; the result is a curious blend of slavery and swashbuckling, eloquence and corn, liberalism and racism.

The movie begins at West Point, where we meet the young cadets about to graduate in 1854. The charismatic leader is J. E. B. Stuart (Errol Flynn), whose friends and followers are George Armstrong Custer (Ronald Reagan, short-haired and square), Sheridan, Longstreet, Pickett, and Hood. Already, history has been given short shrift; of these famous Civil War generals, only Stuart was in the class of 1854; Longstreet was in the class of 1842, Pickett of 1846, Hood and Sheridan of 1853, and Custer of 1861. In the movie they comprise a sort of Robin Hood's band.

Possibly because of the immense success of *Gone With the Wind* the year before, *The Santa Fe Trail* strains to exonerate and justify the South. The film's opening shot of West Point is accompanied by the title, "under a brilliant Commandant named Robert E. Lee it was already building for the defense of a newly-won nation in a new world."<sup>1</sup> In conflict with Stuart, our Southern hero, is the villainous cadet Rader (a fine, surly performance by Van Heflin), who is distributing propaganda from John Brown. When Stuart criticizes Rader for having too tight a curb chain on his horse, Rader replies, "I hear you know how to harness negroes down South, too—with a strap across their backs." (5) Although this statement is true, it is made unsympathetic by the fact that Rader is already established as a sneering heavy who is inhumane to his steed.

Back in the barracks, Rader reads aloud from John Brown: "A breaking up of the American Union as it now exists is the basis of my plan, and that destruction must be made upon the issue of negro slavery and no other. The Union must then be reorganized on the great principle of emancipation. . . . If the Federal Government and its Constitution are opposed to my way of thinking, the fault is not mine but theirs, and I shall continue to oppose them with every means and every weapon at my disposal!" (6-7) Stuart interrupts, "Who wrote that inflammatory rot?" and Rader replies, "A wise man by the name of John Brown." (7) When Custer tries to act as peacemaker by observing "There's no regulation against a cadet having his own ideas," Stuart replies, "There *is* one against

spreading treasonable policies,” and continues in response to Rader’s sneer, “I know the truth of this problem far better than you, Rader. The South will settle it her own way—but not thru the lying propaganda of renegades like this John Brown, or any of his followers!” (8)

Throughout, the film presents Southerners as men of good will who want, actually, to abolish slavery, but in their own good time. Not only does Stuart, the Virginia gentleman, oppose slavery, but Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis are presented as wholly sympathetic.

Rader, the villain, is given the anti-slavery arguments, but he presents the populist viewpoint in such a way as to make it appear subversive. Like Hinton R. Helper, author of *The Impending Crisis*, Rader is the spokesman for the proletariat who hates not so much slavery as the Southern aristocracy it supports. To Stuart, Rader snarls, “I’ve taken a lot from you stiff-necked Southerners. For fifty years you’ve been watering your precious family trees with the sweat of negro slaves—piling up wealth and snobbery until now you think you own the Government *and* the Army! Anyone who disagrees with you is a lying renegade—a rabble-rousing traitor!—Then get this from *me*, Stuart—and all you other Mason-Dixie plutocrats—the time is coming when the rest of us will wipe you and your kind off the face of the Earth!” (Changes 9-14) Although there is a good deal of truth to these charges, Rader’s sneering delivery makes them offensive; and at the time when the Dies Committee was witch-hunting, such lines might even sound like Communist propaganda to the right-wing. As it is, Robert E. Lee gives Rader a dishonorable discharge for seditious conspiracy.

Stuart and his cadet colleagues are rewarded by assignment to “the most dangerous branch of the Army—to Fort Leavenworth, in the Kansas territory.” (16) At West Point, the graduation speaker is “the Secretary of War of the United States of America—the Honorable Jefferson Davis.” (22) In fact, John B. Floyd was Secretary of War in 1854. Davis comes across not as the future president of the Confederacy but as a spokesman for preserving the Union. He speaks of the cadet’s “responsibility to his Government. . . . You young officers are today close friends and comrades. Let nothing disturb that friendship—no differences of political philosophy, of class or creed, of prejudice or hatreds! You men have one duty, and one alone—*America*.” In conclusion, he stresses the need for “unswerving loyalty.” (23) This was timely propaganda in 1940 to a nation on the eve of World War II, but it is a historical distortion to present it as the views of Jefferson Davis. The film, however, consistently maintains that the Civil War was caused wholly by fanatical abolitionists.

Slavery itself is never really depicted; we see runaway slaves only as stereotypical motion picture blacks of the 1930s and 1940s—wide-eyed and frightened during moments of danger. *Spartacus*, by contrast, does show the horrors of slavery, from the chain gang toiling in quarries at the beginning, to the dungeons in which the gladiators wait for the prostitutes

periodically provided for them, to the atrocities by which defeated insurrectionists are put to death.

On the train that Stuart and the other officers are taking to Kansas, there are a Negro husband, wife, and two children traveling with John Brown's son Oliver. A conductor says to Brown that the Negroes must ride in the last coach. Brown retorts, "Their tickets give them the right to ride wherever they please." (20) But this civil rights sentiment is cancelled when Brown shoots a tough Kansan who challenges him, and then leaps off the train. Another Kansan points to the Negroes and says, "*There's* the trouble! Negro slaves! He was tryin' to sneak 'em across the line!" This sentiment not only goes unchallenged, but Col. Cyrus K. Holliday, who is building the Santa Fe Railroad, adds, "There'll never be any peace along the Santa Fe Trail while John Brown or any of his followers are alive." (34) This time the advocates of racial freedom and equality are not only seditious but dangerous desperadoes.

The screenplay next includes a scene in which Brown and his men murder a man named Fitzmiller, but this episode was omitted from the film. Instead, we see a freight train in the Leavenworth yard with crates labeled "HOLY BIBLES. . . FOR MR. J. SMITH NEWTON, KANSAS TERRITORY. Shipped by DR. HENRY WARD BEECHER, Boston, Mass." (30) These "Beecher's Bibles" are, of course, Sharpe's rifles. For some unexplained reason, the "Bibles" are not delivered, but are included in a freight caravan bound for New Mexico with Stuart, Custer and a troop of cavalry providing an escort. (This is the film's only episode involving the Santa Fe Trail.) John Brown and his band plan to intercept the wagon train and remove the rifles. When one of Brown's sons, 15-year-old Jason, objects to attacking the train, Brown pontificates, "We recognize no law but the will of God. Now do as I command!" In a skirmish with the cavalry, Brown is defeated and Jason is mortally injured when his wagon is wrecked. The dying boy is nursed by the heroine, Colonel Holliday's daughter Kit (Olivia de Havilland), who tells him, "What your father did was wrong, terribly wrong—but his reasons may be right. They may even be great and good reasons, Jason." (74) Jason gasps that it is better for his father to die; "if he dies maybe a dreadful scheme will die with him. . . ," and with his last breath, he tells Kit that Brown can be found "in the house of Shubel Morgan—at Palmyra. . . ." (75) Again, the film is confused and ambiguous; Kit's sympathy for Brown's motives is erased by the death-bed judgment of the son for whose death Brown is responsible. (The actual Jason, who was 21 years old at the time, was captured but not killed. He did break with his father and refused to engage in further violence. At the time of the Harpers Ferry raid, Jason was alive and well in Ohio.)

The movie is at least consistently clear that the end does not justify the means. Here Buckner's screenplay coincides with Nathaniel Hawthorne's judgment that the way to free slaves is not to kill their masters.

But Buckner sounds more like Faulkner than Hawthorne as he consistently defends the Southern code of honor. Kit asks J. E. B. Stuart, "Can't the slaves be freed before it's too late?" Stuart replies, "It *will* be stopped when we hang John Brown. Then the South can settle the problem alone, without loss of pride at being forced by a band of fanatics." Kit: "But what has pride got to do with human lives?" Jeb: "The two things come together down there. You can't pry them apart—even with guns." (77) Custer, from Michigan, also debates slavery on occasion with Stuart, who answers for the military but also for the film, "It isn't our job to decide who's right or wrong about slavery—any more than it is John Brown's." (67) In the film, J. E. B. Stuart always gets the last word. As Stuart, Errol Flynn is dashing, gallant, debonaire, and utterly fearless. Custer is a clean-cut but gawky fellow who is tongue-tied with the girls and who in repartee always loses to Flynn's witty retorts.

John Brown is played by Raymond Massey, who later recreated both Brown and Lincoln in the stage production of *John Brown's Body*. *The Santa Fe Trail* was Massey's first performance in the role, which he later repeated in a 1955 B-class film entitled *Seven Angry Men*. Massey is made up to resemble the Brown of John Steuart Curry's painting. The film presents him as a fanatic, but at least as a sincere and fearless one. He is treated with some respect, and his prophetic speeches are always accompanied by sentimental religious music. Brown is the antagonist but not the villain, a role that is reserved for Rader, who ultimately betrays Brown as well as his country.

Brown is the avenging angel who demands an eye for an eye. After his defeat by Stuart's cavalry, he destroys the settlement of Delaware Crossing to avenge his son's capture. (He does not yet know the boy is dead. This raid is purely fictitious, whereas the film omits Brown's actual murder of five men at Pottawatomie.) When the survivors plan to arm and fight Brown, Stuart tells them, "We have orders to break up the armed forces of both factions—yours as well as Brown's. If you men organize with guns we can draw no line between you." (87) Stuart appears as the man of reason, but he is also the spokesman for law and order, regardless of the issues involved. The film rejects Thoreau's concept of the necessity of civil disobedience when laws are unjust. John C. Calhoun would applaud its position on the legality (whatever the legitimacy) of slavery.

The film in fact goes far to suggest that the blacks find slavery preferable to freedom. Back in Palmyra, Brown, planning to leave Kansas "to continue God's holy work," says he will not take with him a barn full of Negroes he has freed. The script provides directions: "Stolen out of slave country by way of the Underground Railroad, the negroes are huddled in abject terror in the horse-stalls and against the walls. Their clothes in rags, dirty and with matted hair, they look like so many trapped animals as their white-rolling eyes follow John Brown." (91) Here is stereotyping with a vengeance. When Brown reads to them from the Bible, a black

named Samson says, "Please suh, Cap'n Brown—what do dat mean? What you gonna do wif us?" (91) Brown answers righteously, "It means you are free—the first of many millions to whom I shall give freedom from slavery." Samson: "Does—does jes *sayin'* so make us free, Cap'n? How we gonna live—git food an' shelter?" Brown replies loftily and impractically, "You will be released tonight. From thence on you must fend for yourselves. There are many good people in Kansas who will give you work and protection. . . . My work here is done." (92)

Meanwhile, Stuart, disguised as a civilian, has entered Palmyra to spy on Brown's activities. Rader captures him and takes him to Brown at Shubel Morgan's house. (In actuality, Shubel Morgan was a pseudonym of Brown himself. Stuart had met Brown in Kansas, as a member of the force that occupied Brown's camp at Osawatomie, but all of his movie adventures in Kansas are fictitious.) Although a prisoner, Stuart urges Brown to surrender, telling him: "Half the people in America believe in your theory, and some even condone your methods. Abolition is a religion with them, and they will guarantee you a public trial." Brown answers in wrathful eloquence: "You fool, I am not on trial—but the nation itself! Are you too stupid and blinded by a uniform to see as I do, a dark and evil curse laying all over this land—a carnal sin against God that can only be wiped out in blood!" (101) Stuart, the spokesman for moderation, asks, "But why 'in blood?' The people of Virginia have long considered a resolution to abolish slavery. They sense it is a moral wrong, and the rest of the South will follow Virginia's example. All they ask is time." (101) Considering the repression of dissent in Virginia following Nat Turner's insurrection and considering the violent hostility to abolition elsewhere in the South that caused three men to be hanged for reading *The Impending Crisis*, this dialogue is naive. Brown answers with fanatical militancy, ". . . peaceful means have failed. Now I shall force a decision by bringing both sides into armed conflict!" (101) Stuart's advocacy of gradual, non-violent reform resembles Hawthorne's view that a civil war "will only effect by a horrible convulsion the self-same end that might and would have been brought about by a gradual and peaceful change."<sup>2</sup>

The film is an uneasy blend of pacifism and violent adventure (like *Billy Jack* a generation later). While its sentiments are for peace and sweet reasonableness, it excites the audience with characteristic Errol Flynn swashbuckling. About to be hanged by Brown without a trial, Stuart (Flynn) seizes the hangman's revolver and escapes into the barn, where he single-handedly holds off Brown's entire band. In the barn, he finds the terrified Negroes, whom he warns to take cover.

Negro man: "You hear dat, Susie? Dat white man sound like a friend!"

Negro woman (brightening with hope): "Den he must be from de South! We's comin', boss!" (105)

After the cavalry arrive to rescue Stuart and the ex-slaves from the barn that Brown's men have set on fire, Stuart asks the Negro women, ". . . why did you ever leave home?"

1st Negro Woman: "We-ll, old John Brown he *say* he gonna gib us freedom—but pshaw—if dis here Kansas is freedom I ain't got *no* use for it—no sir!"

2nd Negro Woman: "*Me neither!* I jus' wants to git back home to Texas an' set til Kingdom Come!" (108)

Stuart laughs appreciatively at this dialogue, which sounds like some of the pro-slavery responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in one of which Tom survives Simon Legree's beating, goes north, and finds life there so intolerable that he voluntarily reenters slavery. In contrast, the slaves in *Spartacus* are ecstatic on winning their freedom, although they have a tendency towards anarchy which Spartacus must hold in check. *The Santa Fe Trail*, on the other hand, echoes the racist sentiment that emancipated slaves could not cope with freedom and were lost children without the security provided by their masters.

However, the film pays grudging tribute to John Brown, when Stuart tells Custer that Brown is broken for good and the latter replies, "Nothing will ever break the force of John Brown, Jeb—not even death." (109) Brown, looking back at his camp in flames, sees it as the Lord's burning bush and says, "Let there be no peace in all this land until we have revenged ourselves upon Thine enemies! As once Ye smote the Philistines, now smite the fury of Thy wrath upon these blind, mis-begotten fools! And I shall be Thy right hand—I—John Brown, shall be the Sword of Jehovah!" (110)

Back East, we see John Brown addressing Henry Ward Beecher and other abolitionists as he plans his raid on Harpers Ferry. He asks for 100 "well-armed and God-fearing men who believe in the Cause. I will lead them into Virginia—rouse the millions of discontented slaves who will flock to join us—and sweep down thru the South—thru the Carolinas—Georgia—Alabama—Mississippi! Then, with the entire nation in a state of chaos, we can dictate our own terms! (121) When one abolitionist protests that the plan is "high treason! Such a brazen attack would lead to civil war!", Brown replies, "Exactly. That is *exactly* what we want!" (122) The abolitionist asks, "Is it your wish then to destroy the Union—utterly and completely?" Brown is vehement: "My answer to that is—Yes! *To the devil with the Union!* We have got to fight sometime and it might as well be now!" Beecher agrees. (123) Thus the film argues that the impending war is caused not by secession but by "abolitionist treason."

There is treason, however, in Brown's own ranks. Rader has never received any pay from Brown; and when he now insists on it, Brown is furious, charges him with disloyalty and slaps him, declaring, "I have not waited thirty years to bargain with a rogue at the final hour!" Rader then turns Judas and betrays Brown's plans to Stuart, Robert E. Lee and Jef-

person Davis at a military ball in Washington; in return, he wants the reward money. To keep Brown from becoming suspicious, Rader offers to rejoin him, while Davis orders Lee to take troops to Harpers Ferry.

The Harpers Ferry climax is a considerable distortion of history. The film never shows the details of Brown's entry and occupation, but simply has his band occupy the arsenal. When 20 townsmen fire on the arsenal, Brown orders them destroyed, saying "We'll leave a lesson at Harper's Ferry for the rest of the South to profit by." (148) The telegraph officer wires the news, "Eighteen citizens of Harper's Ferry killed and thirty-three wounded by John Brown's invaders in open rebellion!" (149) In fact, Brown's men cut the telegraph wires, and no one knew who was directing the raid until Brown, under a flag of truce, sent a note asking for terms. The screenplay indicates that Brown directed a massacre. Actually, the facts are far more complex and compelling. Brown never ordered a bloody retaliation against the citizens; during the 36 hours' insurrection, his men killed three townsmen, one slaveholder and a Marine. Ironically, the first citizen killed was a free Negro baggage master, Hayward Shepherd. Seventeen people were killed, but most of them were Brown's own men, several of whose deaths were atrocities committed by drunken and violent citizens and militia. Brown's son Watson and another raider were shot under a flag of truce. When the youngest raider, 20-year-old William Leeman fled into the Potomac, militiamen caught up with him on an island and shot him to death. Will Thompson, captured under a flag of truce, was carried off by a drunken mob and murdered. Sharpshooters used his corpse and Leeman's for target practice. A black raider, taken prisoner, narrowly escaped lynching.

Instead of these dramatic details and the preliminary skirmishing, hysteria, and violence before the arrival of troops, the film substitutes the plotting of Rader. When the troops arrive, Brown realizes that Rader has betrayed him. Exclaiming, "And so Judas betrayed Him for a handful of silver!" Brown shoots his terror-stricken subordinate. Thus poetic justice is done upon the fictitious villain, by the self-proclaimed avenging angel of the Lord.

In the battle that ensues, everything is exaggerated. Brown's actual "fort" was the arsenal's small engine-house in the center of town near the railroad tracks. But the script indicates, "The famous Arsenal squats on the crest of a gently sloping hill on the far edge of the town." One of Brown's men exclaims, "This isn't an arsenal; it's a fortress. We could stand off the whole army here." The engine house has been expanded into a bastion at least 100 feet square and about 50 feet high inside, with a second-story platform running around the interior for rifleman and with rifle slits in the walls for thirty or forty men. It is surrounded by stone walls, about 16 feet high. In both fact and film, J. E. B. Stuart, serving under Brevet Colonel Robert E. Lee, delivers under a flag of truce Lee's demand for unconditional surrender; when it is refused, he leaps aside

and signals the attack. In fact, 12 Marines quickly battered in the door, and Lt. Israel Green captured Brown, striking him with a dress sword, thrusting the blade into him, and beating him unconscious with the hilt. But in the film, there is a spectacular battle with artillery blasting great holes in the walls and cavalry charging (an absurd tactic) against the fort, whose defenders shoot down the horsemen right and left. We never see the cavalry arrive. Instead, Stuart leads an infantry attack, sabers men in the fort, and personally captures Brown.

The film stages Brown's execution much as it was portrayed in contemporary sketches, except that the spectators inaccurately include Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Stuart and his fellow West Pointers, and Kit Holliday. Instead of the final speech that Brown made in the courtroom at Charleston, Virginia, Raymond Massey makes a prophetic utterance from the gallows: "I cannot remember a night so dark as to have hindered the coming day, nor a storm so furious as to prevent the return of warm sunshine and the country at peace. I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with blood. . . . [L]et them hang me, and may God forgive them. For they know not what they do. . . ." (159) Emerson wrote that Brown's death would "make the gallows as glorious as the cross";<sup>3</sup> here Brown consciously interprets his death as a crucifixion. But despite Brown's omens of storm, and blood, the film ends on a happy note. Custer falls in love with Jefferson Davis's daughter, and the last scene shows them serving as best man and maid-of-honor at the marriage of Jeb and Kit on a Santa Fe train crossing Western Kansas. As they laughingly celebrate, "the engine whistles in sheer exuberance of spirits." (161) In addition to these unhistorical romances, the film suggests that the lovers will live happily ever after, ignoring the fact that the nation would be at war in a year and a half, and that within five years, J. E. B. Stuart would die in combat.

Scholars might assert that a popular motion picture's interpretations are distortions of history and do not matter; but the fact that the film has been seen by far more people than ever read all of the scholarly studies of Brown does make its presentation significant. It would be over-simple to say, "Movies shape and create popular values," for the relationship is complex, and not all in one direction. But the relationship exists, and is worth investigation. Most critics gave favorable reviews to *The Santa Fe Trail*. *Time* called it "a brilliant and grim account of the Civil War background."<sup>4</sup> *Commonweal's* reviewer Philip T. Hartung said the second half of the film "is so well done that the picture comes close to being first rate. Brown, the slavery question, abolitionists are treated with respect and intelligence."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Oswald Garrison Villard, author of a 1910 biography of Brown, wrote to *The Saturday Review* admiring Raymond Massey's performance but pointing out some of the historical inaccuracies.<sup>6</sup> Only *The Christian Century* attacked the film's treatment of slavery. In a review entitled "An Insidious Attack on the American

Dream,” the reviewer noted that “It was Jefferson Davis, according to this Hollywood version, who was the real champion of the Union. It was the South which played the patient, mediating part in the crisis of the fifties. It was the fanaticism of the North which brought on the war between the states.”<sup>7</sup> There were no academic film journals in 1940 with which to compare these journalistic responses.

As a piece of movie making, divorced from historical interpretations, *The Santa Fe Trail* is quite effective, and John Baxter calls it one of director Michael Curtiz’s “great forties films.”<sup>8</sup> It is visually impressive; it moves at an exciting pace and builds to a powerful climax; its comic relief (provided by Alan Hale and “Big Boy” Williams) is entertaining; and it is well acted, with Massey’s grim righteousness an effective foil to Flynn’s debonaire dash.

But it does not know what to make of slavery, and its confusion may be indicative of a national confusion on the same score. According to northerners Custer and Kit Holliday in the film, slavery is evil and Brown’s cause is just. According to the hero, Stuart, slavery is wrong but the South needs no apology and will resolve the problem peaceably in its own time and way. What brief glimpses we have of blacks show slavery to be benevolent and preferable to a freedom that ignorant blacks cannot cope with. (This is close to the view of pro-slavery apologists such as George Fitzhugh, who in *Cannibals All!* (1857) argued that slavery provided more security and better working conditions than wage slavery.) The one free black is a doorman who has some buffoon servant dialogue as he tries to prevent Stuart’s comic sidekicks, Tex and Barfoot, from crashing the military ball. The film is consistently patronizing towards blacks in a manner too characteristic of its era, when the nation gave lip service to equality but little substance to it. Students now in college are too young to remember that until the late 1950s and early 1960s, most public schools were segregated; blacks were confined to their own movie houses and were permitted to sit only in the third balcony of “legitimate” theatres; parks, swimming pools and beaches were for whites (and some for Gentiles) only; white barbers refused to cut black hair; department stores under white management either would not serve black customers or would not let them try on clothes; many restaurants, restrooms, drinking fountains and hotels were for whites only; neighborhoods were zoned to exclude blacks (and often Jews as well); and most Americans took these conditions for granted.

In its ambiguous portrait of John Brown, *The Santa Fe Trail* does come close to reality, and this characterization gives the picture what historical validity it has. As a true believer who insists that there could be no remission of sins without the shedding of blood, Brown practiced means that did not justify the end. Both John Brown and Spartacus are compared to Christ, and the latter film ends with the revolutionary slave crucified in the identical posture of the Savior. Both are defeated before

the freedom that they predict can come to pass. But Spartacus does not endorse violence for its own sake and does not find satisfaction in the shedding of blood. He is like Camus's rebel, who "in no case . . . demand[s] the right to destroy the existence and the freedom of others. He humiliates no one. . . . He is not only the slave against the master, but also man against the world of master and slave."<sup>9</sup> Brown, on the other hand, resembles Camus's self-righteous revolutionary, who cannot tolerate dissent from his dogma and dialectic, who preaches freedom but practices terrorism. He sees himself as God's avenging angel, but as Camus notes, "Politics is not religion, or if it is, then it is nothing but the Inquisition."<sup>10</sup>

Emerson and Thoreau saw Brown as a martyred saint, while Hawthorne viewed him as a bloody murderer who richly deserved hanging. In combining these views, *The Santa Fe Trail* may come closer to the truth. But it distorts history by placing the blame for the Civil War mainly on Brown while making all its Southerners wholly sympathetic and admirable. Brown makes a convenient scapegoat for an aspect of our history that we have not resolved. In a speech in the screenplay that is cut from the film, Stuart says, "Yes, the crime is John Brown's. But the guilt isn't his alone. Nor is it the South's, as so many believe . . . but the guilt of our nation."<sup>11</sup>

## footnotes

1. Robert Buchner, *The Santa Fe Trail*, unpublished screenplay, Warner Brothers, 1940, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Hollywood, California, 1. Further references to this source are given parenthetically in the body of the text.

2. Nathaniel Hawthorne, letter to Elizabeth Peabody, quoted in Mark Van Doren, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York, 1949), 259.

3. Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, 1949), 402.

4. *Time*, 36 (December 23, 1940), 45.

5. *Commonweal*, 33 (December 27, 1940), 257.

6. *The Saturday Review*, 23 (March 1, 1941), 9.

7. *The Christian Century*, 58 (March 19, 1941), 382.

8. John Baxter, *Hollywood in the Thirties* (New York, 1970), 77.

9. Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York, 1957), 284.

10. *Ibid.*, 302.

11. Buchner, revised scene 8/28/40 unnumbered; a further revision gives this speech to Robert E. Lee (p. 160).