

# Echoes in the Hills: My Eighteen-Month Search for John Brown's Legacy

**Jane Cooper-Wilson**  
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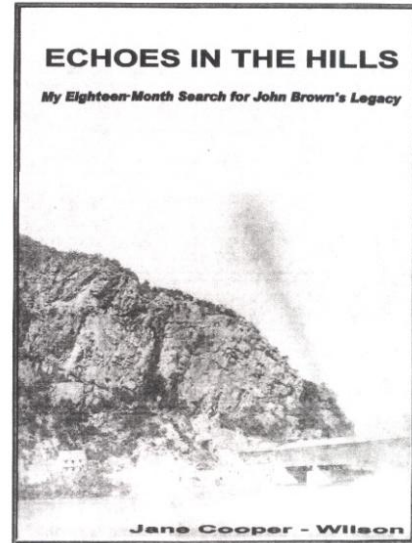
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*Echoes in the Hills* is an historic novel written and self-published by Jane Cooper-Wilson, a Collingwood woman whose passion for her own African-Canadian roots has caused her to become a crusader for local Black history. The novel depicts the life story of John Brown, an Ohio-born white farmer turned radical abolitionist. Cooper-Wilson documents the events leading up to the most significant military action of John Brown's life: the raid on Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, in October of 1859.

This famous raid was the beginning of a much larger plan to establish and occupy fortified bases throughout the South, and to house and protect fugitive slaves on their way north. The raid was not considered a success at the time as most of the members of the small party were captured and sentenced to death, Brown among them. However, the small party of men fought with surprising strength, and held out against the United States Marines for 36 hours. The event would become known as a "famous assault on slavery" and considered by many as the spark that ignited the Civil War. Although Brown's role in the Harpers Ferry raid is well-known among historians, Cooper-Wilson aspires to tell not just the facts of the story, but to expose the personalities and daily trials faced by Brown and his family, as well as the many less-recognized figures involved in this event.

As leader and organizer, Brown was executed for treason against the commonwealth of Virginia, and labeled a terrorist and murderer, but to abolitionists everywhere, Brown was, and still is, considered a hero and martyr for his bravery and contribution to the anti-slavery movement. Cooper-Wilson sets out to explore the events of the raid, and to delve further into the personality and private life of John Brown as a father, husband and "military genius". She has gathered a wealth of primary source documents, including pictures and correspondence with his family, which show the hardships they faced by their separation during the months leading up to the raid and Brown's later confinement before execution. His love for his family is expressed in many letters between himself and his wife, Mary Ann, as well as their many children. Cooper-Wilson uses these letters to reveal John Brown's compassionate side and how greatly it pained him to be apart from his family - proof of how much he sacrificed for his beliefs.

Although there are some instances where quotations may be misaligned with their source, the author effectively uses excerpts of declarations and legal script, newspaper articles, maps, and secret correspondence to aid in creating for the reader a sense of the atmosphere of ante bellum America. These documents are evidence of the doctrine of fear and racial inequality that plagued the South, but also the



growing rage and resentment that would eventually materialize into a united resistance against slavery. As Cooper-Wilson suggests, and as many historians apparently agree, Brown's abolitionist campaign was a significant contributing catalyst for this resistance.

In the chapters leading up to the raid, Cooper-Wilson shows evidence of the numerous connections that Brown made (which included high-ranking politicians) in his effort to rally support for his cause. Most importantly to the author, Brown focused a great deal of his time and energy in Canada West (present-day Ontario) meeting and corresponding with influential figures of power and regular locals alike, many of whom were fugitive slaves from the South. The Chatham-Kent area, a famous end point of the Underground Railroad, and home to the largest Black population in Canada West at that time, was often a safe-haven for Brown, a wanted man himself in the southern states after having helped so many slaves escape to the North and reunite with their families. Cooper-Wilson emphasizes the importance Brown placed on the support and opinion of his northern neighbours. He spent a great deal of time in Chatham and the surrounding area, raising monetary support and fighters for the planned raid, and lecturing to abolitionist audiences.

In her Forward, Cooper-Wilson states that her main goal in telling John Brown's story is to demonstrate how closely aligned Canada and the United States are in collective history, as well as to help African-Canadians see how deeply connected they are to the abolition movement, a goal which is achieved through an extensive amount of research and evidence. It is impressive that Cooper-Wilson was able to collect and assemble *Echoes in the Hills* in only 18 months. Her journey led her across Southern Ontario and half of the United States, to cemeteries, archives, libraries and historical societies, where she gathered and pieced together the details of a story which she feels can educate at the grassroots level. Although the writing is often more demonstrative of the author's enthusiasm for her topic than of the formal conventions of academic style, she has ultimately achieved her goal of bringing John Brown's story and the depth of Black history in our area to the attention of the reader.



**Sarina Ryan**