

“BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC”

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The “Battle Hymn of The Republic” by Julia Ward Howe is more identified with the American Civil War than any other piece of music. Sung to the tune of an old Methodist camp meeting song, it drew upon the musical legacy of African-American spirituals as well as that of the Protestant “Second Great Awakening.” In response to the hanging of John Brown in October 1859, anonymous admirers who shared his vision of slave liberation began using the old tune:

John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave,

John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave,

John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave,

But his soul goes marching on.

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

His soul goes marching on.

Thrice acknowledging that “John Brown’s Body lies a-mouldering in the grave,” it closed with the ominous warning that his dream of slave liberation marched on. Easily learned and used, the song spread quickly through the antislavery movement, the Republican Party, and, in 1861, the volunteer units of the Federal army.

However, the song’s very simplicity inspired not only many verses but also more elaborate and less repetitive lyrics. “The John Brown Song,” for example, related that

He captured Harper’s Ferry with his nineteen men so true,

They frightened old Virginia ’til she trembled through and through.

They hanged him for a traitor, they themselves the traitor crew,

But his truth is marching on.

With the outbreak of the war, the volunteer units of the Federal army, particularly those with antislavery leaderships, took up the refrain. Clearly, until the formal adoption of emancipation as a war goal in late 1862, the singing of these verses represented a musical appeal to expand the political and social purposes of the war.

In October 1861, the newly arrived 14th Massachusetts sang “John Brown’s Body” as it slogged its way through Washington during a driving rainstorm. Its commander, Colonel William B. Greene, was a radical Transcendentalist who, unusually, had been to West Point and provided a vital link between New England abolitionist leaders and the emerging military hierarchy. Assigned to build and garrison the fortifications adjacent to Washington in northern Virginia, the regiment frequently hosted official and quasiofficial visitors with its singing of “John Brown’s Body.”

In November, Governor John Andrew of Massachusetts brought a party across the Potomac to visit the regiment at Fort Albany. Julia Ward Howe was among the visitors. On the way back, Andrew remarked to Julia Ward Howe that the song might better employ its lines. On her return to Washington, Howe penned “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;

He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:

His truth is marching on.

The title alone spoke volumes. The “Battle Hymn of the Republic” sings of a faith that history represented the unfolding of the divine will for human justice, that the American republic represented such progress, and that the ordeal of civil strife remained part of this ultimately benevolent process. Like its author, it continued to be identified with the range of social reforms that emerged from the Civil War, ranging from black rights to women’s suffrage and the labor movement. It has, in the process, remained one of the most popular of the nation’s patriotic “hymns.”

See also

Brown, John; “**Dixie**”; **Howe, Julia Ward**; **Music**.

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Mark A. Lause

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