

Bleeding Kansas, Bleeding Missouri: The Long Civil War on the Border

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Recommended Citation

Hernando, Matthew (2014) "Bleeding Kansas, Bleeding Missouri: The Long Civil War on the Border," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.1.07

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss1/6>

Review

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Winter 2014

Earle, Johnathan and Burke, Diane Mutti. *Bleeding Kansas, Bleeding Missouri: The Long Civil War on the Border*. University Press of Kansas, \$37.50
ISBN 9780700619290

Current State of Kansas-Missouri Border Studies

Anthologies of scholarly essays are notorious in academic circles, both for the often indifferent quality of the work presented, and for having a paltry rationale for assembling and publishing them in the first place. In *Bleeding Kansas, Bleeding Missouri: The Long Civil War on the Border*, edited by Jonathan Earle and Diane M. Burke, we have a fortunate exception to this pattern. The basic goal of this volume is to present an accurate summary of the current scholarly literature related to the Civil War in the Kansas-Missouri border region.

The editors accomplish this objective by assembling essays from fourteen different scholars who have contributed to this literature and dividing them into three thematically arranged sections, a framework that provides a sense of order and cohesion to the project. The first section consists of four chapters covering different aspects of the political dispute that ultimately led to the outbreak of hostilities in the border region. The second contains five chapters covering topics related to the transition from political debate to armed conflict along the Kansas-Missouri border. The third and final section includes five chapters dealing with the aftermath of the war in the border region and the contested struggle to define the meaning of that conflict for future generations.

The editors also include one stand-alone chapter by the late Michael Fellman, a revered scholar whose book *Inside War* remains the most influential study of guerilla warfare in Missouri during the Civil War. The editors probably decided to place Fellman's essay by itself because, of the fifteen essays in this volume, this is the one most unlike the others. Unlike *Inside War*, which says very little about the role of religion in the conflict, Fellman's chapter in this book

attempts to reinterpret the border war in Kansas and Missouri as part of a broader narrative of Christian holy warfare stretching back to the medieval Crusades. Fellman argues that an ideology of Christian war enabled combatants in Missouri and Kansas to debase and dehumanize one another, turning the conflict into a Hobbesian “war of all against all” that ravaged the region. This might be true, but in support of this contention he offers just two supporting examples – a speech from Kansas Governor John J. Ingals and the diary of Union Lieutenant Sherman Bodwell – neither of which seems to possess sufficient force to settle his case.¹

Kristen Epps begins section one with a chapter explaining the underlying economic factors that influenced the hostilities between pro-slavery and anti-slavery residents of Kansas and Missouri. She contends that pro-slavery settlers in the Kansas-Missouri border region had a vested interest in expanding their peculiar institution because slave labor had played a vital role in settling the area. Slaves contributed to the settlement process through their labor in such enterprises as tobacco and cotton agriculture, as well as the various supplementary trades that facilitated westward expansion: blacksmithing, carpentry, tavern and inn keeping, outfitting wagon trains, etc.

Because pro-slavery settlers identified their economic interests with slavery, they reacted with alarm to any challenge to it. As Nichole Etcheson shows in her chapter on the so-called “goose question” (the nickname for the slavery issue in Kansas), pro-slavery residents of Kansas viewed the free-soil movement as a “crisis of law and order.” In particular, when free soil people challenged the pro-slavery government’s legitimacy, opposed the Lecompton Constitution, and defied the *Dred Scott* ruling, pro-slavery settlers believed they acted in defiance of the law. Thus, they were in earnest when they branded themselves the “law and order party,” even while using extra-legal methods such as vigilantism and voter fraud to achieve their goals.

Kristen Oertel follows Etcheson with a chapter that discusses the role of gendered and racially charged rhetoric in the debate over slavery in Kansas. She asserts that one factor contributing to the hostility between the pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions was their diverging views of manhood: southerners advocated a “martial manhood” that expressed itself through violence, while northerners preferred a “restrained manliness” that emphasized taming the inner beast. Northerners and southerners implicitly understood this dichotomy, and employed rhetoric that both emasculated their opponents and called into question

their whiteness, for in the nineteenth century “to be a man was to be white, civilized, and free.”

Pearl Ponce concludes section one with a chapter that describes the controversy over the Lecompton Constitution as a complicated interaction between local and national political actors. She shows how the fate of the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution – that is, its ultimate failure – was sealed by the intransigence of President James Buchanan, who pushed Congress to ratify it despite concerns over its democratic legitimacy, and the reluctance of territorial governor James Denver, who first recommended setting aside the constitution, then half-heartedly supported it when Buchanan refused to change his mind.

Tonus Mullis begins section two with a chapter that examines the failed attempt by the U.S. and Missouri State governments to eliminate the threat posed by the anti-slavery Jayhawker movement in southeastern Kansas. Mullis’s main contribution is to reexamine the U.S. Army’s “Southwest Expedition” into Kansas in 1860, which unlike previous historians he regards as a failure because it did not eradicate the Jayhawker bands led by the likes of Charles Jennison and James Montgomery. Instead, these groups survived as a coherent military force to fight in the Civil War.

If Kansas proved a stumbling block to the U.S. Army, it was a political boon to Abraham Lincoln, as Jonathan Earle demonstrates in his chapter. Earle contends that the Kansas dispute helped make Lincoln’s presidency possible by giving him an opportunity to reinvent himself politically as an anti-slavery champion. In particular, Earle points to Lincoln’s 1859 speaking tour in Kansas as a time when Lincoln refined the rhetorical critique of slavery that would make him a contender for the Republican presidential nomination in 1860.

Once the fighting in the border region began, it quickly descended into the bloody chaos of guerrilla warfare. Part of the reason for this, as Christopher Phillips argues in his chapter, is that from 1861 to 1862 federal officials in Missouri tried to create a “dominion system” consisting of an array of counterinsurgency techniques. These included martial law, military garrisons, loyalty oaths, and a provost marshal system that provided a military police force to enforce loyalty in occupied areas. The system was designed to enforce loyalty to the federal government, but it also radicalized the conflict, forced Missourians to pick sides, and turned them against each other.

Not only whites, but also slaves, participated in this conflict, as Diane Burke demonstrates in her chapter on the death of slavery in Missouri. Burke shows how the Civil War led to the rapid unraveling of the peculiar institution in Missouri as enslaved Missourians took advantage of the opportunities for resistance that the war created. The most common form this resistance took was flight, as thousands of slaves left their masters to seek refuge in free territory or with the U.S. Army.

Women also took part in the border war, as Joseph Beilein shows in this section's final chapter. Not only did southern women operate the supply network that kept the guerrillas fighting, they played an indispensable role in constructing the profound sense of masculinity that motivated rebel guerrillas to fight. Beilein argues that Missouri guerrillas, like most southern men, believed that being a man meant acquiring both love and fame. The partisan war in Missouri offered them an opportunity to achieve martial immortality, to which their women bore witness through their love and devotion. The famed "guerrilla shirts," made for each fighter by his wife or sweetheart, represented both values, since they symbolized both his status as a warrior and the love of his woman.

After the shooting subsided, different groups in the Kansas-Missouri border region – whites and blacks, ex-Confederates and ex-Unionists – struggled to find a place in a society upended by the war. For many ex-Confederates that meant coming to terms with slavery's demise, and as Aaron Astor shows in the opening chapter of section three, they did so reluctantly. Astor's analysis of the race-baiting rhetoric employed in the *Lexington Weekly Caucasian*, perhaps Missouri's premier anti-Reconstruction newspaper, shows that many Missourians clung to the language and values of white supremacy long after emancipation came to Missouri. The Caucasian's vituperative attacks on the Republican Party, the Freedmen's Bureau, and especially the freedmen themselves, created a "rubric of resistance" that ex-Confederates in other southern states would copy in their effort to defeat Reconstruction.

Black Missourians did not sit idly by as the rising tide of white supremacy overtook them, but fought back through the political process. As John McKerley argues in his chapter on black political activism, rather than blindly following a few influential leaders, black voters in Missouri had a keenly nuanced understanding of their own interests. They acted on those interests, using the state-wide Republican Party as a vehicle first to aggressively push for black suffrage, then to elect as many black office-holders as possible.

Unlike Missouri, where racial conflict was palpable throughout the Reconstruction period and afterward, Kansans saw their state as a bucolic paradise devoid of such animosity. They were mistaken, as Brent Campney shows in his chapter describing the emergence of a “free state narrative” by which white Kansans tried to reinvent the birth of their state as a heroic struggle for the liberation of slaves. The post-war migration of African-Americans to Kansas, coupled with a rising tide of lynching and inter-racial violence, complicated this self-constructed mythology.

A similar process of reimagining transpired across the Kansas-Missouri border region. As Jeremy Neely shows in his chapter on the reunions of the Quantrill guerrillas, Missouri and Kansas both participated in a broad national movement in the late nineteenth century to memorialize the Civil War in way that emphasized national reconciliation and forgiveness, and downplayed the war’s fundamental causes, including slavery. Also ignored was the role of Missouri guerrillas in border war. The survivors of Quantrill’s band tried to change that when they began holding reunion meetings in 1898, provoking violent condemnations on the other side of the border, which proved that perhaps not all was forgiven or forgotten.

Finally, in an especially engaging concluding chapter, Jennifer Weber explains how the Kansas-Missouri border war has been memorialized in sport, notably in the football rivalry between the universities of Kansas and Missouri. Although a longstanding collegiate rivalry, Weber shows that the so-called “Border War” between these universities had no overtly historical connection to the Civil War. The idea that animosity between the two schools stemmed from the war was popularized in the 1990’s by local media and school administrators who wanted to drum up interest in their athletic competitions.

This book has many strengths. As mentioned above, it is an excellent survey of recent historical scholarship on the Kansas-Missouri border conflict. The editors’ arrangement of this material is clear and easy to follow, though it bears mentioning that Jonathan Earle’s contribution might just as easily have been included in section one (given its focus on pre-war political events). The individual essays included in this volume are all fine pieces of scholarship, though readers familiar with this literature may have a few modest reservations about some of them. For example, Kristen Epps makes a strong argument about the vital role that slavery played in settling the border region, but it seems more

persuasive as it pertains to western Missouri, where slavery was a robust institution, than the Kansas Territory where it was miniscule.² Pearl Ponce's criticism of James Buchanan's role in the Lecompton debacle is warranted, though her praise for Governor Denver seems a bit lavish; at best he refrained from compounding his superior's mistakes. Tony Mullis is certainly correct that the Southwest Expedition failed to destroy the Jayhawkers in Southeast Kansas, but if the Army's objective was to disperse rather than destroy them, did it not *succeed* in that respect? Joseph Beilein's essay raises the interesting point – more of a question than a criticism – of whether Kansas women played a role in the Jayhawker movement comparable to what Missouri women did for the bushwhackers. If they did, then it might show that the bushwhacker conception of masculinity was not especially southern. Aaron Astor is probably correct that the *Weekly Caucasian's* "rubric of resistance" was copied in other states, but it would be helpful to provide examples of other southern newspapers copying its rhetoric or style. Likewise, Brent Campney is also surely right that Kansas's "free state narrative" was a self-serving illusion. But if Kansas was not exactly the "anti-South" that its proponents imagined, neither was it the South, which is why some 17,000 former slaves had moved there by 1870.³ Near the end of his essay Campney, chides several historians for exaggerating the extent to which racial violence was a distinctly *southern* phenomenon. If some historians have erred in that direction, however, the regrettable fact remains that in the broad sweep of U.S. history racial violence has been more pervasive in the South than any other region.

Notwithstanding these reservations, *Bleeding Kansas, Bleeding Missouri* remains an excellent collection of scholarship. The editors and contributors to the project should take pride in it. It belongs on the shelf of every scholar with an interest in this area of history, and a general audience would likely consider it highly beneficial reading material as well.

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¹ Fellman's chapter consists mainly of material adapted from the second chapter of his book, *In the Name of God and Country*, a broader work concerning the role of terrorism in American history. I have read this chapter, and find the argument advanced therein, and the evidence used to support it,

essentially the same as in this book.

² The 1860 census famously found only two slaves in the Kansas Territory, and though earlier territorial censuses reported more (as many as 193 out of a total population of 8,500 in 1855), the institution was never very strong in the Kansas Territory. See, Kristen T. Oertel, *Bleeding Borders: Race, Gender, and Violence in Pre-Civil War Kansas* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press), 40.

³ See, Diane Burke's essay in the same volume, page 167.