

The Homefront in Civil War Missouri

Matthew J. Hernando

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Hernando, Matthew J. (2014) "The Homefront in Civil War Missouri," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 16 : Iss. 4

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.4.23

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss4/22>

Review

Hernando, Matthew J.

Fall 2014

Erwin, James *The Homefront in Civil War Missouri*. History Press, \$19.99
ISBN 9781626194335

Illusory Frontlines, Illusory Homefront in Wartime Missouri

In reviewing any book, the conscientious reviewer should always keep in mind at least two preliminary questions: First, what type of book is this? Second, what purpose did the author intend for it to accomplish? In the case of James W. Erwin's *The Homefront in Civil War Missouri*, these questions are particularly important because Mr. Erwin, a freelance writer and successful former attorney from the St. Louis area, has produced a different sort of work than most of the books regularly reviewed by *Civil War Book Review*. To put it simply, *Homefront* is not a work of original historical scholarship, nor did the author apparently intend it to be such. It has no documentation other than a bibliography, which contains only a smattering of primary source materials such as a small handful of letters (some found online), old county histories, and published document collections. As the author himself observes in the acknowledgements section, this book "does not pretend to exhaust" its subject – the impact of the Civil War on Missouri's homefront – and indeed "barely scratches the surface" of that subject.

Instead, Mr. Erwin's apparent intention, though he never spells it out in unambiguous terms, was to compose a brief, highly accessible volume consisting mainly of various stories that together illustrate the troubles and travails of Missourians who confronted America's deadliest war in their own backyard. In that respect, *Homefront* succeeds reasonably well. Indeed, this slim volume (just over 110 pages) could easily serve as an introductory text for high school or college students wanting to learn more about Missouri's unique civil war history. It is tightly organized into ten concise chapters, each dealing with a different theme related to Missouri's Civil War homefront.

Some of *Homefront's* strongest chapters include chapter three, which examines the various methods – including military commissions, imprisonment, and property confiscation – that Missouri's pro-Union provisional government used to suppress anti-Union activities by southern secessionists and Confederate guerrillas. Likewise, chapter five sheds light on the movement for secession in different parts of rural Missouri, and explains how that movement provoked a harsh federal reaction that included ever more repressive measures designed to quash the rebellion. General Orders Numbers 19 and 24 – which required all loyal men to enroll in the militia and all disloyal men to register as such – are but two prominent examples of this policy. Ironically, another part of that anti-secessionist program included such measures as the Second Confiscation Act, which punished Missouri rebels by emancipating their slaves. Thus, in the chaotic atmosphere of wartime Missouri, repression and liberation sometimes marched hand in hand. Finally, chapter six does an admirable job of illustrating the impact of guerrilla warfare on the religious lives of Missourians, including its implications for religious freedom. Though a tradition of "apolitical theology" had dominated Missouri's religious culture before the war, once the fighting commenced churches and ministers also began taking sides, which often provoked retaliation by the other side. The result was a chilled religious climate wherein every religious act or utterance had to be weighed against the risk of reprisal, as Rev. Samuel McPheeters discovered when he found himself banished from the state for the relatively innocuous offense of baptizing a child named after Confederate general Sterling Price.

The book does have some weaknesses, however, two of which are worth mentioning here. The first is a curious analytical shortcoming: for a book supposedly written about Missouri's Civil War "homefront," its author strangely neglects to define that term. This is not a negligible omission, for one of the distinguishing features of Missouri's Civil War experience is that most Missourians at some point experienced the war in a direct and personal way, as the internecine violence of guerrilla war brought the conflict literally to their doorsteps. Indeed, if one understands "homefront" only in the traditional sense – a place where the war was not – it is fair to ask to what extent Missouri actually *had* a homefront.

The second weakness concerns the breadth of sources consulted for this volume. The author clearly has read heavily in the secondary historical literature concerning Missouri and the Civil War, but he misses some of the more recent scholarship, including work published on topics to which he has devoted whole

chapters here. For example, chapter seven, which deals with the role of women in Missouri's Civil War, might have been improved through consultation with Joseph Beilein's recent work on Missouri's rebel women during the Civil War.¹ Likewise, chapter ten, which examines the experiences of newly emancipated slaves in Missouri, could have been rounded out by a discussion of black political activism during the early post-emancipation years. For that purpose John McKerley's recent book chapter on black suffrage activism in Missouri might have been a good resource to consult.²

Notwithstanding these reservations, Erwin's Homefront remains a valuable work. It is a solid introduction to some of the larger themes involved in the burgeoning historical literature devoted to Missouri's unique Civil War experience. Though historians working in this field will find much of this material familiar, students with less background in this subject matter will likely enjoy Erwin's diverse collection of anecdotes and his bracing narrative style.

¹ Joseph M. Beilein, Jr., "The Guerrilla Shirt: A Labor of Love and the Style of Rebellion in Civil War Missouri," *Civil War History* 58, No. 2 (June 2012): 151-79.

²John W. McKerley, "'We Promise to Use the Ballot as We Did the Bayonet': Black Suffrage Activism and the Limits of Loyalty in Reconstruction Missouri," in *Bleeding Kansas, Bleeding Missouri*, ed. Diane Mutti Burke and Jonathan Earle (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

Dr. Matthew J. Hernando is a long-time resident of southwest Missouri. He is a graduate of Springfield public schools and Evangel University, where he completed his bachelor's degree in history. He is also a graduate of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where he earned a doctorate in U.S. history. Throughout his career, Dr. Hernando has developed a deep and abiding fascination with the Ozarks, the rugged hill country in southern Missouri and northern Arkansas which he calls home, and which is also his main area of research interest. His new book, Faces Like Devils: The Bald Knobber Vigilantes in the Ozarks, examines the role of vigilante justice in Ozark society in the late nineteenth century.