

Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era

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Review

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Etcheson, Nicole *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era*.
University of Kansas Press, \$34.95 ISBN 700612874

Cowboy democracy

Forming a state out of a divided people

Nicole Etcheson's new work, **Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era**, could have been a great book; instead it is merely a good one. Today, both Kansas and the United States stand on the threshold of the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, one of the true watershed events in American history. Most historians would agree that the spiraling violence in Kansas Territory over the fate of 192 slaves was the harbinger of civil war.

More than a generation has passed since Alice Nichol's penned her classic **Bleeding Kansas** and the time for a critical re-examination of Kansas' painful birth has arrived. The events of this troubled past are begging to be re-evaluated and their proper place in the history of the Republic determined. Etcheson's book has arrived at precisely the right time to fill this social, academic and political void. It is a solid, factual account of the perhaps the most bitter and confusing era in American politics. After reading this book there can be no doubt as to why the men and women who survived this ordeal chose for the new state's motto the Latin phrase, To the stars through difficulty.

The author does a more than adequate job in attempting to make sense of the confusion and advances her thesis that the armed struggle on the Kansas plains was about preserving the white man's liberty. She goes on to demonstrate that as the conflict raged and grew in intensity, it eventually came to embrace the abolitionist concept of freedom for the slaves as well.

Etcheson's scholarship is meticulous and her footnotes are a bonanza for serious Kansas historians and she does a first-rate job in detailing how southerners became convinced that secession might just be the only alternative to a nation that was controlled by northern politicians and interests. She also demonstrates how northern politicians wearied of continuous compromise with their southern counterparts.

The author does an excellent job in highlighting the role Kansas played in national politics and the role national politicians played in attempting to influence the course of events within the territory. The drama's key players are all found within the pages of the text but not in the sense to make them come alive and seem real. These men and women would have fared better if more antidotal incidents had been included.

Throughout the text Etcheson pays tribute to the efforts of the United States Army in keeping the two feuding camps from open warfare but on many occasions she shortchanges the military's efforts. On one such occasion, she attributes the seizure of weapons to the civilian marshal when in actuality it was accomplished by Phillip St. George Cooke's 2nd Dragoons. Cooke became suspicious at the sparse number of women in the wagon train of settlers and ordered the wagons stopped and searched. His troopers located the majority of the contents of the Iowa City Arsenal that had been looted sometime earlier.

The text's one map located adjacent to the title page is completely inadequate for the reader to follow the action described in the text. The constant turning back to map to see the location of the events described is a major distraction. The addition of several maps is needed for the reader to follow the ebb and flow of factional fortunes from 1855 to 1860.

The Kansas Territory's habit of chewing-up governors was never addressed as a theme. One historian has called the territory the graveyard of governors. The governors seem at times to be two-dimensional figures that more resemble characters in a Greek tragedy than living and breathing human beings. Perhaps a chart that traced crucial events in their tenure month-by-month could have illustrated each of the governor's administrations.

Along that same line a yearly summation of each of the major events of the territory with the location, date, its impact on local Free Soil and pro-slavery communities and their impact on the national anti-slavery and pro-slavery

movements would have greatly reduced the reader's confusion. Etcheson did as good as job as anyone describing the detailed legal maneuvering involved the attempts to adopt the Lecompton Constitution.

A great many serious incidents were not addressed in Etcheson's book; things that need to be discussed in any serious work of Kansas Territorial history. Things such the allegations that Governor Andrew Reeder accepted a bribe from the Pawnee Town Association to declare their community the territorial capital. Events in Pawnee City that led to one legislature losing its credibility and the establishment of another renegade assembly should have been addressed. The sentiments of such men such Martin Conway and John Wakefield on the issues of slavery and freedom are worth remembering and hearing again and again. These events, among many others, ought to have been included in Etcheson's study.

In conclusion, Etcheson attempts a Herculean work and does a capable job in taming it. It is a good book and worth the money. Read it for the facts, but read Tom Goodrich's *War to the Knife* to get the actual feeling for the times and personalities involved.

R. Scott Price, a major in the U.S. Army Reserves, is author of Nathaniel Lyon: Harbinger From Kansas (1991) and The Ghosts of Fort Riley (1998). He has just finished a fictional work on Civil War drummer boys entitled The Shattered Drum, and currently has two other books underway.