

### Border War: Fighting Over Slavery Before the Civil War

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## Review

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**Harrold, Stanley** *Border War: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War*.  
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### Repositioning the Cause of the Civil War

According to Stanley Harrold's important new book, *Border War: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War*, from nearly the moment of its birth, the United States was home to a "border war" along the boundary separating North and South. The eleven states that touched this border clashed repeatedly over the issue of slavery, especially the issue of fugitive slaves. This conflict "had a profound impact on American life, culture, and politics," Harrold argues. "It helped shape the sectional struggle, the Civil War, and how that war proceeded" (xii).

Limited at first to political and judicial skirmishes over the return of fugitives to their masters, the border war escalated during the 1840s and 1850s into actual armed battles between residents of the borderlands. Planters in the lower South may have complained loudly about runaway slaves and the northern whites who assisted them, but slave owners in the lands closest to the North—the Border South—were the ones who suffered real damage as a result of slave escapes. Hence, when interstate diplomacy and the actions of state governments failed to provide adequate security for the property rights of slaveholders, whites in the Border South demanded federal action both to assist in the recovery of fugitive slaves and to prevent northerners from interfering with that process. The fabled unionism of the Border South rested, more than anything else, on faith that the power of the federal government provided the greatest possible security against the threat posed to slavery by runaway slaves and the Underground Railroad.

As Harrold's story enters the crisis years of the sectional controversy, 1848-1861, it becomes clear that *Border War* amounts to nothing less than a

reorientation of our understanding of the coming of the Civil War. In Harrold's telling, the fundamental cause of the Civil War was not the somewhat abstract debate about the extension of slavery into the far western territories—a controversy over an “imaginary negro in an impossible place,” as Daniel Webster judged it. Instead, the real cause of the war was the border war over fugitive slaves. Harrold argues that “the two most Union-shattering controversies of the 1850s”—the Fugitive Slave Law and Bleeding Kansas episode—“originated in the border struggle” (164). In regard to the Fugitive Slave Law, the federal government acceded to the demands of Border South masters for protection against northerners who interfered with the recovery of fugitives. In the case of Bleeding Kansas, the effort of slaveholders in Missouri to prevent Kansas from turning into a haven for fugitives led, first, to the adoption of popular sovereignty for the new territory through the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and, second, to bloodshed, as “border ruffians” from Missouri used violence and intimidation in an effort to prevent Kansas from becoming a free territory that might harbor runaway slaves.

To whites in the Border South, John Brown's Raid at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in 1859 “seemed to be the logical product of years of abolitionist involvement in slave escapes and more recent assaults” on their region (185). Most whites saw the actions of Brown, a veteran of warfare in Kansas and instigator of spectacular slave rescues from the Border South, “in the context of a losing struggle against northern aggression” (193). As the furor provoked by John Brown's Raid grew into rage over Abraham Lincoln's election thirteen months later, many white southerners from the borderlands continued to insist that the federal union, not secession from it, offered the best security for slavery against the threat posed by runaway slaves and their northern abettors. This attitude, born out of the border war, was “crucial in keeping most of the Border South in the Union” (211). And, the refusal of the Border South to secede likely doomed the Confederacy from the outset of the war.

In writing *Border War*, Harrold has produced a first-rate example of a genre of historical writing all too often ignored in our age of highly specialized local studies: a synthesis. By drawing together recent scholarship with his own prodigious, original research, the author enables us to see a pattern that has been nearly invisible, the enduring and frequent conflict among people along the sectional border and the importance of that conflict to the larger national scene.

Harrold's synthesis rests upon an outpouring of new scholarship on the Underground Railroad. Fifty years ago, Larry Gara's *The Liberty Line* (The University of Kentucky Press, 1961) taught historians to be wary of the legend of the Underground Railroad. The traditional story of heroic "operators" clandestinely carrying "passengers" from "station" to "station" along secret escape routes, Gara argued, was largely a romantic fable that could not bear under critical scrutiny. Historians learned this lesson well, but not the general public, which continues to cherish the romantic fable, adding to it in recent years the poorly documented notion that secretly coded quilts were widely used to guide slaves safely along the path to freedom. If Gara taught scholars to be skeptical of the Underground Railroad, they may have learned the lesson too well—as Gara himself later acknowledged—by undervaluing genuine, organized efforts to help slaves escape. Stanley Harrold has been in the forefront of a new scholarly effort to reexamine the Underground Railroad, to recognize that behind the legend lies the real story of "organized escape networks" (172), and it is this new scholarship that *Border War* draws upon so effectively.

*Border War* is also part of the emerging effort by scholars to reconfigure the very idea of politics, to see it not simply as competition for governmental power between organized parties, but as any activity that might affect the distribution of power in any institutional or group setting. This new view helps us recognize that marginalized, disfranchised groups retain an ability to engage in politics, thereby shaping history and affecting the course of their own lives. In the historiography of slavery, this new view asserts the importance of black political agency. *Border War*, by demonstrating that escape networks were biracial in nature and that African Americans played a central role in operating those networks, shows how perhaps the most marginalized group in American society could alter the course of history.

In this regard, it should be noted that Gara's original point was not to minimize the importance of fugitive slaves or to dismiss all efforts to assist them, but instead to refocus our attention away from the whites who occasionally rescued slaves to the slaves themselves. Most fugitives, Gara argued, got away by relying on their own pluck and ingenuity, with very little, if any, assistance from whites. And whatever assistance they received from fellow blacks was usually spontaneous, rendered without the planning or sponsorship of any organized group.

By emphasizing the centrality of organized escape networks rather than the actions of individual slaves, the effect of *Border War*—whether intentional or not—is to minimize the importance of these primary actors. While looking for sources of tension within the borderlands, the book also overlooks other actions by slaves with political implications, actions even more widespread than slave escapes: ordinary, daily acts of slave resistance. These actions—encouraged, whites believed, by northern antislavery activism—threatened a breakdown of plantation discipline, awakening fears of an impending racial war unless the slave population was better controlled. The prospect of bloody insurrection by slave rebels seemed more threatening than massive property losses caused by fugitive slaves.

In asserting the central importance of escape networks to the events that preceded the Civil War, *Border War* comes up against the limitations of current scholarship. Harrold is usually forced to rely upon impressionistic evidence on the size and extent of the Underground Railroad. We desperately need more works that bring together all that can be known presently about the Underground Railroad, works that measure its size and scope and assess the extent to which fugitives received assistance from escape networks. We need more scholarship that brings clarity to the organizational structure of the escape networks that made up the genuine Underground Railroad, a loose, weblike complex of vigilance committees, fugitive aid and Canadian emigration societies, black churches, organized rescues of captured fugitives, and clandestine abolitionist forays into the South. Until we have this scholarship, it is difficult to affirm Harrold's argument that whites in the Border South were reacting to a real threat provoked by widespread, effective underground railroad activity rather than simply overreacting to a mostly symbolic threat.

Additionally, *Border War* runs into the challenge scholars invariably face when trying to extend the slavery issue past the secession crisis into the war itself. Decades of research have conclusively demonstrated the centrality of slavery in causing the sectional crisis and pushing the South to secede from the Union. *Border War* adds even more heft to the body of evidence that proves the importance of slavery in the coming of the Civil War. Yet, once secession occurred, many new factors emerged that affected the issue of loyalty or disloyalty to the Union. For most Americans, no straight line connected their prewar positions on slavery to the stance they took throughout the long course of the war.

To take one example suggested by Harrold's argument, if the fugitive slave issue was the principle one driving the United States to the brink of Civil War, why did the southern states that experienced the greatest anger over this issue—those of the Border South—prove to be the southern states that were most loyal to the Union? Why did the people of the Border South, after years of engaging in heated, and often armed, conflict with northerners over fugitive slaves suddenly join forces with those same northerners against fellow slaveholders in the Cotton States? For that matter, why were the people of the Border North, those most likely to have engaged in prewar battles with the South over fugitive slaves, also the northerners most likely to demonstrate sympathy for the South during the Civil War? Harrold's answer for the Border South is that its unionism was based on the belief that the greatest security for slavery was the protection offered by the federal government. While acknowledging that many other factors contributed to Border South unionism, including military coercion, Harrold insists on the primacy of the issue of fugitive slaves, a prioritization of issues that is unconvincing. By picturing a mostly proslavery Border South facing off against a mostly antislavery Border North, Harrold does not sufficiently acknowledge the complexity of views within the border regions.

These reservations, however, should not distract us from the importance of *Border War* in charting new directions in the history of the Civil War era. Stanley Harrold has written an excellent book that is sure to prompt debate and additional research. It will be required reading for historians of the slavery controversy in the United States.

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