Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky & Missouri

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Recommended Citation

Klotter, James C. (2012) "Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky & Missouri," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.3.05

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss3/4>

Review

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Summer 2012

Astor, Aaron *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky & Missouri*. Louisiana State University Press, \$47.50 ISBN 978-0-8071-4298-1

A New Look at a Complex Region

Look at studies of the northern states during the Civil War. Seldom will they discuss in any detail events in Kentucky and Missouri, even though those two states officially remained loyal during the conflict. Examine works on the South during that divisive struggle and into Reconstruction. Likely, Missouri and Kentucky will appear only in passing, if it all, despite the fact that those two political entities had representatives in the Confederate Congress and were stars in the CSA flag. In fact, over the years, sectional studies have often ignored those two key states in their research and analysis. It is almost as if those places existed in some kind of scholarly Star Trek Neutral Zone, not to be visited, at any cost. Over the years only an occasional monograph or a section in a state textbook survey has told their stories.

Yet, they deserve better, for it is a crucially important story. As William Freehling, William Harris, Stanley Harrold, and others have noted, had the four border slave states gone with the Confederacy, that would have made the odds much more even and the North's task much more difficult. Three of the four largest cities in the South lay in that crucial region; the states held crucial strategic positions; they had a population of three million people; their loyalty was key to Union victory. But, despite that, students of Clio have only sporadically looked at those states.

Professor Aaron Astor of Maryville College has now helped fill that historiographical void in this revision of his 2006 Northwestern University dissertation. In this volume in T. Michael Parrish's series, *Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War*, Astor looks at the border states of

Kentucky and Missouri, examines how those places at the crossroads of the nation dealt with crucial issues in wartime and postwar America, and shows how their history varied from the usual accounts told about other regions.

Here, in those two states, many supported both union and slavery. Here the slaves might fight with their masters, not against them. Here the victors almost immediately joined the vanquished in the postwar world. Looking specifically at seven Missouri counties that made up Little Dixie, and eight mostly Central Bluegrass counties in Kentucky, Professor Astor brings a fresh historical eye to the landscape and paints a picture filled with more shades and hues of history than seen before.

As the author stresses, the states shared many characteristics and often a similar history. In both, conservative unionists dominated the majority of the white male population and thought the union could best protect border state slavery. They both opposed the extremes of southern Fire-Eaters and northern abolitionists. The two states desired order over change. They saw little threat from the election of Abraham Lincoln; they experienced no crisis of fear. Lincoln's call for volunteers to put down the rebellion pushed "reluctant Confederates" into the southern cause, more as a reaction to perceived federal despotism than for Confederate nation building (97). Both places produced rump Confederate governments. Both Missouri and Kentucky experienced searing guerrilla warfare and, in reaction, "the desperation of counterinsurgency" by the Union Army produced anger among some supportive of the federal cause (117). More than that, however, the enlistment of black soldiers in both states began a transformation from conservative unionists to "belated Confederates" (195). By 1866, that change had become reality and by the time of the Fifteenth Amendment four years hence, both entities would be eventually dominated by pro-Confederate Democrats. Throughout all those years, in both bodies politic, blacks faced violent opposition as they struggled for economic, political, and social equality, and used existing community, kin, and religious networks to undermine the system and develop a political consciousness. When they finally could vote, ex-slaves cast ballots almost unanimously for the Republican Party, but their relatively small numbers in comparison to the Deep South, made that party a minority force in the political wars.

Yet, if alike in many ways, the two states differed as well. Missouri called a convention to consider secession; Kentucky did not. The Show Me State used force to keep the state in the union; the Bluegrass State first favored a

four-month period of formal neutrality, and then went with the Union after Confederate forces invaded the commonwealth. Postwar Missouri did not let either ex-slaves or ex-Confederates vote for five years after the war, kept unionists in power in that time, and thus gave more protection to the freed blacks; Kentucky permitted Rebels to vote almost immediately and they soon controlled government, doing little to stem the violence directed toward the black population. As a result, Kentucky experienced more racial unrest than did Missouri and forbid black testimony until 1872—actions that caused the Freedmen's Bureau to operate in the Bluegrass, but not in Missouri.

Thus, in the 1860-1870 era, those states differed in several ways from the general United States example. As Astor notes, their experience "complicates the existing historiography of the Civil War and Reconstruction" (247). Because of their loyal state status, both Missouri and Kentucky had little support or guidance from Congress as they sought to find their way. Both states were exempt from the 1867 Reconstruction Act, for example. As a result, ex-slaves in both places first voted only in 1870, several years after many former slaves in the reconstructed South had cast ballots. In short, the history of the two states changes the established picture of the conflict and its aftermath. In 1860, for instance, the political culture in Kentucky and Missouri "embraced pragmatism over ideological inflexibility, tradition over revolutionary cant, and social diversity over plantation monoculture" (244). Yet, following the war, many in those same states not only embraced the Lost Cause but even provided the leadership to that cause by showing the South how it could operate against ex-slaves once the federal limits were removed from it.

In addition to these broader themes, author Astor sprinkles in insightful research findings throughout. Using census records, he finds, for example, that 12 percent of Lexington (KY) slaves were hired out in 1860, thus putting a solid figure to a frequent generalization. Moreover, his examination of a Kentucky militia unit and a sample of the population of a Missouri county not surprisingly indicates that those with larger holdings in real estate and slaves tended to be supporters of the southern cause. But that study also shows that many slaveholders were in fact also unionists.

This is an excellent addition to the literature of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Though it has the occasional error, does not cite a few important sources, and contains too many content footnotes, overall it is clearly written, solidly researched, and well argued. And even if some of this has been seen

before, much has not, and no one has united it as well for these two states as has Aaron Astor. Professor Astor joins a new group of scholars who at last are turning the spotlight of history on the often-forgotten Border States. And what those beams are revealing is both exciting and important.

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