

The Border Between Them: Violence and Reconciliation on the Kansas-Missouri Line

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Recommended Citation

Foote, Lorien (2008) "The Border Between Them: Violence and Reconciliation on the Kansas-Missouri Line," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss4/7>

Review

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Fall 2008

Neely, Jeremy *The Border Between Them: Violence and Reconciliation on the Kansas-Missouri Line*. University of Missouri Press, \$39.95 hardcover ISBN 9780826217295

Border War

The stories of "Bleeding Kansas" in the 1850's and guerillas in Civil War Missouri are familiar to students of American history. Jeremy Neely places those stories in the context of a long transformation. His theme, as the title of the books suggests, is how the meaning of the border changed across time. Neely uses a representative population sample and supplemental agriculture and slave schedules from the federal census of 1850-1880 for six border counties as the basis of his research. This approach yields interesting results. Neely's data illuminates the process by which demographic changes at first fostered violence and later promoted reconciliation along the contested boundary between Missouri and Kansas.

There is no natural geographic boundary between Kansas and Missouri, but early in the nineteenth century the area became a border between Indians and whites and a political line, based on the Missouri Compromise, that limited slavery's expansion. After Congress opened Kansas to slavery, the Kansas-Missouri line became a stark border demarking the ideological fault lines of slavery and freedom. Changes in the population combined with events of violence to drive settlers on each side of the border apart. Whereas in 1855, the population of the border counties resembled each other in origin and occupation, by 1860, most residents on the Missouri side hailed from slave states and most residents on the Kansas side were born in free territory.

Neely offers an interesting perspective on the changes in the border during Reconstruction. A wave of immigration from states where slavery had been illegal increased the similarities between the people on either side of the

Kansas/Missouri line. With the end of slavery in Missouri, the migration of freed slaves to Kansas, and the reluctance of whites in both states to grant full citizenship to African Americans, the border no longer marked a significant difference in the status of black people. Debates over post-war railroad construction, especially whether local taxes should fund such projects, exposed “new divisions and partnerships that ran along lines of economic self-interest, but not the once-inflamed state boundary” (170).

By the 1880’s, border residents were part of a shared regional culture based on the family farm. They lived in the Corn Belt; the look of the landscape and the lives of the population “rendered the border between them practically invisible” (207). The legacy of the past retained some hold on the people of the two states. The Kansas-Missouri line still marked the different partisan loyalties that had emerged at mid-century.

The Border Between Them is a solid book with obvious origins as a dissertation. Despite its grand themes of transformation and its elucidation of one of the most important border lands in U.S. history, the study reads as local history. Its most important contribution to the larger study of American history is its tale of reconciliation, the story of the demographic and economic changes that rendered once divided peoples essential similar. But the wounds of the past have lingered. Neely, who earned his doctorate at the University of Missouri, comments that the animated and acerbic rivalry between the Kansas Jayhawks and the Missouri Tigers is one sign of the belief among residents that the border still matters. This reviewer, an alumnus of the University of Kansas, could not agree more.

Lorien Foote is an associate professor at the University of Central Arkansas. She is the author of Seeking the One Great Remedy: Francis George Shaw and Nineteenth-Century Reform and is currently writing a book about manhood and military justice in the Union Army.