

Seeding Civil War: Kansas in the National News, 1854-1858

John R. Wunder

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Review

Wunder, John R.

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Miner, Craig *Seeding Civil War: Kansas in the National News, 1854-1858*.
University Press of Kansas, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 9780700616121

Bleeding Kansas in the Newspapers

The state of "state" history today is a sorry one except for a few. Too many history departments at major universities have decided that state history is not a particular specialty they wish to continue with faculty investment. They have forgotten that state histories in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the building blocks of modern American history. Still one state stands out above the rest for constant quality state history – that is, the understanding of the history of a place within a regional and national context. That state is Kansas.

The book contributors to Kansas history are legion – James Malin, George Anderson, Homer Socolofsky, Charles Wood, Donald Worster, Rita Napier, Nicole Etcheson, Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, James Sherow, William Unrau, . . . and Craig Miner. Their works are contiguous and continuous throughout the decades, and they continue to explore and discover the intricacies and nuances about Kansas to the present day. These historians, I submit, often have made "a mark."

Of course, Kansas does have certain advantages. Where else does one find significant Indian history, settlement, railroads, the dust bowl, agricultural revolutions, twentieth-century presidential rivals, major civil rights breakthroughs, and the Civil War? Actually, Craig Miner has found most of these dramas and made important historical contributions fleshing them out. He is one of the most productive of these Kansas historians, having previously published *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas* (1986); *Kansas: the History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000* (2002); *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas* (2006), among other Kansas books. And now comes his contribution to the pre-Civil War years, *Seeding Civil War: Kansas in the*

National News, 1854-1858 (2008).

It is Miner's contention that the events in 1850s Kansas provoked national and regional argument unlike any other in the tense times preceding the Civil War. They provided the seeds and the soil for national division. Sides were chosen; and the stress point over the slavery debate exploded in rhetoric. On page one, Miner plants his thesis: "Kansas was more important to the coming of the Civil War than has been hitherto recognized, and that it was important *more* because of how events there were talked about in the national press than because of the significance of those events themselves." He then goes about the serious business of proving his point. Along the way he explores hundreds of thousands of newspaper articles in tens of hundreds of northern, eastern, and southern communities. Western papers were few and isolated, and although Miner sampled them as well, they offered few commentaries. The newspaper editorials proved pungent, and Miner discovered regional diversities of opinion. Not everyone in New England wanted to obliterate Missourians; not everyone in the South felt slavery must be enhanced at every step.

Seeding Civil War is divided into eight chapters with a brief introduction and conclusion. The chapter titles are symbolic of the verve with which Miner applies his "pen." Chapter 1 "Manufacturing Opinion" sets the stage; Chapter 2 "The All-Absorbing Question" addresses the quandary posed by Kansas expansion in the Union; Chapter 3 "Vox Populi" considers immigration to Kansas and why it throws dry wood on the flickering flames; and Chapter 4 "First Pure, Then Peaceable" ponders gunrunning and religious fervor and the taking of the populace up to the precipice of war. Could peace be achieved at this late a date? – many in the nation wondered. Thereafter follows Chapter 5 "Martyrology," wherein minimal blood spilt gains maximum exposure; Chapter 6 "A Serpent at the Heart," how the Kansas troubles lead journalists in every region to ponder Kansas and the unthinkable – secession; Chapter 7 "The Graveyard of Governors," why seven territorial governors of a sort in Kansas Territory's first three years explain the impossibility of political compromise and the ending of the bloodshed; and Chapter 8 "Lecompton," the natural evolution of a flawed political concept to an accelerated cultural divide.

By early 1858, the press is exhausted with the topic of Kansas as are Kansans. It was as if, Miner subscribes, the nation discovered that Kansas was truly a microcosm. Everywhere, the nation was now infected with division. "Popular sovereignty" might have been a democratic principle, but the structure

to implement it was not possible. Some papers tagged it a “pettifogging device,” Miner observes. The conclusion tells us that “The Fires Go Out.” Actually, Miner offers that best words for concluding this story. This book shows, he argues, how the press in 1850s America offered significant commentary on voting, religion, leadership, race, law, freedom, authority, potential justifications for revolution, and treason. “However, its narrowest purpose is its most important contribution. That is, the deepest significance here is in increased understanding of how the nation dealt with the issue of the admission of Kansas, a topic of great importance all by itself.” Miner then forcefully concludes, “It should be clear to the reader of this book that Kansas was not only a national issue but, for a period of four years, *the* national issue” (246).

This tight, beautifully scripted monograph is a major contribution to the story of the realization of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. It explains how a national understanding of Bleeding Kansas evolved. For those who wish to know more about why the Civil War happened and for those who simply enjoy quality history, this book is must reading.

John R. Wunder is professor of History and Journalism at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. His most recent books include The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854 (University of Nebraska Press, 2008) co-edited with Joann M. Ross and Nebraska Moments (University of Nebraska Press, 2007) co-authored with Susan A. Wunder and Donald R. Hickey.