War Upon Our Border: Two Ohio Valley Communities Navigate The Civil War

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Review

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Rockenbach, Stephen *War Upon Our Border: Two Ohio Valley Communities Navigate the Civil War*. University of Virginia Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780813939186

A Tale of Two Towns

This study of the Civil War in Corydon, Indiana, and Frankfort, Kentucky, originated as a University of Cincinnati doctoral dissertation approved by a stellar committee whose members personify the historiographical literatures that Stephen I. Rockenbach engages. The thesis director was Christopher Phillips, the leading explicator of the impact of the Civil War on regional identity in the Middle Border. Another advisor was Wayne K. Durrill, author of the first important Civil War community study to take a place on the shelf filled out over the last twenty years by works from Edward Ayers, Martin Crawford, Nicole Etcheson, Jonathan Dean Sarris, and other scholars. Legal historian Linda Przybyszewski began her distinguished career with an examination of the racial and political ideology of *Plessy v. Ferguson* dissenter John Marshall Harlan, the most prominent public figure to emerge from Civil War Frankfort. (Walter Q. Gresham would hold that distinction for Corydon.) The final member of the team, outstanding military historian Mark Grimsley, provided expertise in the extensive scholarship on guerrilla warfare and Union “hard war” policies. Rockenbach’s resulting book will be welcomed by research specialists in each of these fields.

Rockenbach’s selection of his focal communities is elegant. He underscores his central argument that the antebellum Ohio River Valley was a harmonious region despite the pressures of sectional politics by choosing two towns on almost exactly the same latitude. His northern pendant is actually located slightly to the south of his southern pendant, but mostly Corydon is about seventy-eight miles due west of Frankfort. That distance permits some direct interactions between the communities, but Rockenbach describes inland rural nodes in a

complex network rather than a narrow binary. Corydon communicates with the Ohio River through the waterfront towns of Mauckport, Indiana, and Brandenburg, Kentucky, and the more substantial commercial center of New Albany, Indiana. The major city of Louisville lies about a third of the way from Corydon and Frankfort, and its influence radiates westward and eastward. Both communities were the scene of brief but locally significant military action. Confederate troops commanded by Braxton Bragg occupied Frankfort for a month in fall 1862; Confederate raiders led by John Hunt Morgan sacked Corydon in July 1863. Particularly interesting is the contrast between the capital forsaken by Indiana in 1825 and the capital permanently established by Kentucky in 1792. Rockenbach describes Corydon and much of the southern tier of the state as frequently alienated from Indianapolis and the Great Lakes economy beyond. Frankfort reflected the fissures of its diverse state.

The heart of the duality is of course that Corydon was a non-slaveholding community and Frankfort was a slaveholding community that remained in the Union. Before the war the exclusionary racism of southern Indiana complemented the regime of bondage in Kentucky. That solidarity persisted for a while. Early recruitment efforts reached across state lines, though Rockenbach wryly notes that many of his Kentuckians “chose to follow a policy of individual neutrality” even after state neutrality failed, as only 9.4% of white men of military age in Franklin County enlisted in the Confederate army and 12.5% in the Union army (56). But over the course of the war Ohio River Valley unity collapsed. Economic dislocations and security anxieties that peaked together in Morgan’s raid caused Corydon to turn inward, sometimes in local conflict. The murder of the provost marshal during the summer 1864 draft dramatized these tensions. Frankfort experienced a more marked transformation after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, even though Lincoln’s policy did not apply to Kentucky. Recruitment of black soldiers became a powerful force in the breakdown of the slave order. Union supporters increasingly tended to equate slaveholding and disloyalty. White Frankforters desperate to hold onto slavery bitterly resented Stephen G. Burbridge’s and John M. Palmer’s administration of the Department of Kentucky. As deserters came home from the failing Confederate army, they found fertile soil for intensification of guerrilla activities in and around Franklin County. Rockenbach concludes that “the Civil War not only reshaped communities such as Frankfort and Corydon, it broke up the Ohio Valley as an economic, social, and political borderland, making the Ohio River the newly established boundary between the North and the South” (173).

After a simple schematic map in the first chapter, the only illustrations in *War Upon Our Borders* are a panoramic map of Frankfort in 1871 and a bird's-eye-view postcard of Corydon in the early twentieth century. The distant, elevated perspectives of these images aptly correspond to the long-term white romanticization of the war Rockenbach finds in both towns and contrasts with the monument that African Americans in Frankfort dedicated in Green Hill Cemetery on July 4, 1924, to honor black Union soldiers from the area. The book is a ground-level view drawn mostly from newspapers, official documents, and some family papers. The study confirms that the Civil War was a crisis not only for the nation but also for local communities.

Thomas J. Brown, professor of history at the University of South Carolina, is the author of Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina (University of South Carolina Press, 2015).