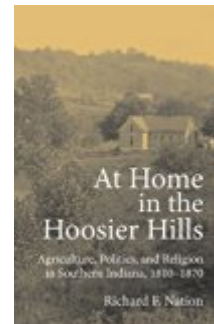


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard F. Nation. *At Home in the Hoosier Hills: Agriculture, Politics, and Religion in Southern Indiana, 1810-1870*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. x + 274 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34591-2.

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Localism Transcendent

With *At Home in the Hoosier Hills: Agriculture, Politics, and Religion in Southern Indiana, 1810-1870*, Richard F. Nation has added an important level of complexity to the study of Midwestern history. In this tightly focused study, Nation examines the strength and sources of localism in the agrarian hill country of southern Indiana—an ideology that was contrary to the nationalism that was more characteristic of the greater Midwest—through the Civil War era. The heart of the hill country residents' localism, according to Nation, was their abiding belief that their specific interests were best protected when all manner of governance was both local and locally regulated. Thus, this study traces localist ideology not only in politics but also in religious and economic (agricultural) behavior as a means to illustrate how and why southern Indiana's hill country people resisted and negotiated changes associated with market integration.

Using land, census, and tax records, several personal accounts, and county sampling, Nation begins by carefully relating the centrality of land to the early Indiana (and Midwest) story. "Almost all these early settlers came to farm," he correctly points out (p. 16). Moreover, the communities that developed in the hill country revolved around family farming. In keeping with the study's persistent theme of local governance, Nation casts the family as "[h]ighly hierarchical" (p. 33), and governed firmly by patriarchy. Yet in doing so he minimizes strong and recent work that has been done on families and family relations during the early republic that reveals, among other things, the extent of post-

Revolutionary influences (i.e., egalitarianism) which promoted more flexible gender roles and, certainly, family relations [1]. These are *particularly* evident in agrarian families. Ohio pioneer William Cooper Howells' own experiences evidence the degree to which domestic and farm chores could be age- and gender-blind when he wrote: "The rule was, that whoever had the strength to work, took hold and helped." [2]

Nation then moves on to explore the manifestations of localism in the hill country's major institutions, or structures. With regards to religion, the strongest churches were those that granted autonomy to local congregations, in this case the Primitive Baptists and the German Catholics. Both groups revolved around the local congregation, active participation, and doctrinal adherence, with a "great distrust of anything that took place outside the scope of their community's authority"—i.e., missionary activity (p. 38). Men were less likely than wives and mothers to formally join; yet, Nation argues, "the entire family belonged to the community" when it came to church discipline and moral authority (p. 41).

Nation contends that the pursuit and preference of "local moral regulation" was even more apparent in the hill country's agricultural economy which centered on hog and corn farming. Hoosiers' primary, risk-averse strategy was "safety-first agriculture" in which the family's needs were met first. Surplus produce could be sent to distant markets, although Nation frequently asserts that the hill country "feared" these markets because they

were outside local control and moral regulation, and thus to their way of thinking were “immoral” (p. 78). It is this section that is both strong and problematic. When Nation steps away from the structuralist approach (which tends to yield more assertions than illustrations, more telling than showing), the work comes alive, particularly as he describes in rich detail the region’s agricultural activities. Here his use of probate records also adds to our understanding. But the structuralist approach dominates the study.

More problematic is the treatment of farm women. The field of rural women’s history has expanded to include far more insight than is acknowledged here. Can it really be that it was simple materialism and *not* a sense of accomplishment, farming knowledge, or partnership in the family farming enterprise that actuated women toward market interaction and determined their economic activities? “*To purchase more cotton goods,*” Nation states, “Hoosier women seem to have shifted the emphasis of their production onto butter and eggs” (p. 110, emphasis added). This almost sounds like the “pin-money” justification for women’s work in the early twentieth century and sadly overlooks many important studies on rural women. While farm women clearly enjoyed the fruits of the market when they were available, to state that materialism drove their agricultural activity is to deny them a sense of (family) enterprise and shrewd farming practices.[3]

Moreover, scholars would do well to avoid employing phraseology that separates women from being farmers. To say, for example, “the farmer and his wife” (p. 111) is somewhat sexist and implies that the wife is not a farmer even though her agricultural activities have just been detailed by the author. They are farm people—farm men and farm women—or farmers, or husbands and wives. Unfortunately this problematic language is more common in academic scholarship than it should be. One reading of the Anna Briggs Bentley letters, published as *American Grit*, about pioneering in Ohio’s early decades would go a long way toward understanding the roles farm women played in the agricultural development of the early Midwest and family farming.[4]

As for politics, southern Indiana farmers found support for their vision of egalitarianism and a localist world in the Democratic Party. Here, the multifaceted nature of hill country localism is more clearly identifiable. For example, Nation points out the complexities surrounding the Temperance movement, explaining that the issue went beyond wet versus dry. It was infused not only

with moral overtones, but also with economic anxiety when it came down to the potential for lost income in the move to remove whiskey as one way to market corn. In this and other fights, southern Hoosiers “sought unremittingly to ensure that localism was maintained” (p. 185). Yet, transformative changes were in the offing that would chip away at the power of localism to hold sway over the hill country including the railroad, renewed westward expansion, and, ultimately, the Civil War.

Overall, *At Home in the Hoosier Hills* offers important insight on an overlooked aspect of Indiana and Midwest history and should be read eagerly with this in mind. Indeed Nation’s research is admirable, regardless of this reviewer’s quarrels with the book’s format and some depictions. This volume will be a valuable part of any number of different course reading lists.

Notes

[1]. Important family studies include Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1998); Shawn Johansen, *Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Industrializing America* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988). For an overview and assessment of changing family relations in the early republic, with references to early Indiana, see Ginette Aley, “Westward Expansion, John Tipton, and the Emergence of the American Midwest, 1800-1839” (Ph.D. diss., Iowa State University, 2005), chapter 5; Ginette Aley, “Grist, Grit, and Rural Society in the Early Midwest: Insight Gleaned from Grain,” *Ohio Valley History* 5 (Summer 2005): pp. 3-20.

[2]. William Cooper Howells, *Recollections of Life in Ohio, From 1813-1840* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke, Co., 1895), pp. 156-57. The oft-cited French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville observed that even American family relations of the early republic were influenced and softened by democracy when he wrote: “The master and the constituted ruler have vanished; the father remains.” See *Democracy in America* (1838; reprint, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), vol. 2: p.195.

[3]. Two important studies showing rural women as highly involved decision-makers in agriculture are Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and Sally McMurry, *Transforming Rural Life: Dairying Families and Agricultural Change, 1820-1885*

(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). For women's roles in agriculture in Indiana and the Midwest see Barbara J. Steinson, "Rural Life in Indiana, 1800-1950," *Indiana Magazine of History* 90 (1994): pp. 203-50; Ginette Aley, "'Knotted Together Like Roots in the Darkness': Rural Midwestern Women and Region," *Agricultural History* 77 (Summer 2003): pp. 453-81; Emily Foster, ed., *American Grit: A Woman's Letters from the Ohio*

Frontier (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002).

[4]. Surprisingly, this is the second book that I have been asked to review on the Midwest within the last year in which this kind of language is employed. See Ginette Aley, review of *From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur: The Transformation of Midwestern Agriculture*, by Dennis S. Nordin and Roy V. Scott, *Journal of Illinois History* 8 (Autumn 2005): pp. 242-44.

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