H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald L. Gilmore. *Civil War on the Missouri-Kansas Border.* Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 2006. 400 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58980-329-9.

Reviewed by Daniel Sauerwein (Department of History, University of North Dakota)
Published on H-CivWar (October, 2007)

High Hopes Dashed: The Lost Cause Resurfaces

Donald L. Gilmore attempted to write new, long overdue scholarship on an often overlooked area of the Civil War. Instead, the reader endures a book that has the tone of histories written over one hundred years ago as opposed to today. Gilmore's work has some worthwhile aspects to it, but large problems overshadow the good and tarnish this book for the professional historical audience.

Gilmore starts by expressing the desire to look at the Kansas-Missouri area during the Civil War from the side of the vanquished, which is a worthwhile endeavor, especially in today's historical scholarship. However, there is a fine line between presenting the other side of a story and sympathizing with a cause and figures that are not morally justifiable. Gilmore crossed that line in *Civil War on the Missouri-Kansas Border*.

Throughout the book, Gilmore tries to paint the proslavery and later Confederate sympathizers in a positive light. For instance, Gilmore refers to the settlement of Kansas as illegal, arguing that the settlement of the state was intended for proslavery Missourians and other Southerners. He also consistently paints antislavery Kansans as villains, while proslavery Kansans and Missourians are victims of radicals and, during the war, the oppressive forces of the Abraham Lincoln government. Gilmore's attempt to "sugar coat" this Southern sympathy by stating that his ancestors fought for the Union is ludicrous, as a noble action by one's ancestors does not permit the writing of bad history.

Gilmore tries to paint the guerrillas of Missouri as victims of circumstances. He focuses on William Quantrill, who Gilmore notes as having a happy upbringing in an attempt to normalize Quantrill to a history that often looks for examples from his life to explain later guerilla actions. However, the author paints Quantrill as a "simple country schoolteacher," who was initially proslavery, but altered his views, though this is never explained (p. 167). He is also unclear about how Quantrill became a target for federal officials.

Gilmore argues that the guerrillas were the victim of "a thorough character assassination" (p. 209). He makes a point to mention how no recent scholarship portrays them properly, instead making the guerrillas out to be from lower classes. This is interesting considering how Gilmore utilizes very few sources published in the last quarter century. It seems that even if the guerrillas were upper-class Missourians, their actions during the war overshadow their upbringing.

His later attempt to normalize guerrilla activity by pointing to examples in the American Revolution and, especially, the Vietnam War is irresponsible. First, he only looks at the few atrocities committed against the Vietnamese by Americans, but does not mention reasons behind them, as he does with the Confederate guerrillas. Second, this brief discussion tarnishes the reputation of American service members, because while he attempts to normalize partisan forces in Missouri, he paints Vietnam War veterans in a wholly negative light, all for the sake of defending men (Quantrill and other Confederate guerrillas) who deserve little defense.

One of the largest problems with this book is Gilmore's implicit defense of the slave-based economy of Missouri. Several times, he mentions how abolitionist forces engaged in stealing slaves, including those who escaped through the Underground Railroad, which he describes as illegal (p. 39). While Gilmore may be attempting to reflect the tone of the day, he chooses his words poorly and paints himself as sympathetic to the immoral institution of slavery. Towards the end of the work, he notes the destruction of the slave economy–which when coupled with descriptions of the situation in Missouri as very bad, if not dire–gives an air of sadness on Gilmore's part to the ending of slavery in Missouri. This is not to accuse Gilmore of being proslavery or racist, but of poorly describing historical situations.

A major source of trouble with this work is the scholarship. While Gilmore uses several good sources, including various manuscript collections, newspapers, and the *Official Record*, his scholarship possesses large holes. A majority of his secondary sources are very dated, with most being over fifty years old. In addition, many are products of local history. While this is not to insult local history or take away from its value to historical scholarship, Gilmore uses it too often. He utilizes no major work from any contemporary historian to lend credibility to the local sources he cites. Another problem with reliance on so many local sources is the bias, which may taint historical analysis. Lack of major historical works or articles hurts the validity of the book.

Another troublesome area for Gilmore's study is his background. As stated on the back flap of the dust jacket, Gilmore possesses both bachelor's and master's degrees in English. This training allows Gilmore to write a good story, but not good history. His lack of formal training in history is evident by the deficit of historiography in his work.

To be fair, there are some positive aspects to Gilmore's work. He brings to light several key events that are not usually known surrounding the history of the Civil War in Missouri and Kansas. His training in English is evident by the wonderful description of the events surrounding both the Camp Jackson affair in St. Louis and the Battle of Wilson's Creek. In addition, Gilmore provides many illustrations, including maps inside the covers, as well as numerous photographs of key individuals involved with the Border War. The illustrations and examination of often overlooked events from the Civil War in Missouri and Kansas are interesting.

Overall, Gilmore's attempt to write a history of the Border War during the Civil War from a new and exciting angle failed. While he brings to light important events surrounding this period, he is too consumed with defending the Southern cause and their supporters in Missouri. His endeavor to look at this period from the eyes of the defeated was a noble idea, but the problems prevent readers from truly understanding this aspect of the Civil War in the way Gilmore intended. Overall, historical and general audiences should avoid *Civil War on the Missouri-Kansas Border* if seeking to understand the complex nature of the Civil War in Missouri and Kansas.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Daniel Sauerwein. Review of Gilmore, Donald L., *Civil War on the Missouri-Kansas Border*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13664

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.