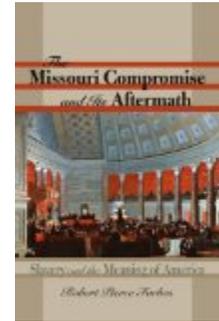


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Pierce Forbes. *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath: Slavery and the Meaning of America.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 369 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3105-2.

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Published on H-SHEAR (June, 2008)



Throwback to the Backroom

With this volume, Robert Pierce Forbes offers the first book-length consideration of the Missouri crisis since Glover Moore's 1953 study, *The Missouri Controversy*. It is part of a welcome rise in scholarly attention to an episode in sectional politics that historians of the early Republic have until now been more inclined to acknowledge than to study.[1] It is, in one sense, a revision of Moore's pro-Southern take, as Forbes's sympathies lie with the anti-slavery side of the Missouri debates and he is more attuned to slavery's place at the heart of the structure of American politics. But, in another sense, Forbes's is an old-school account focused on backroom maneuverings rather than the political rhetoric and popular mobilization that are the staples of more recent political history, a historiography he neglects.

Forbes's approach to the Missouri imbroglio and its aftershocks places individual actors front and center. That is part and parcel of his decision to scrutinize wheeling and dealing behind the scenes rather than the public opinion surrounding these events. For the covert work that created the Missouri Compromises of 1820 and 1821, James Monroe takes Forbes's center stage. In this account, this Virginian with an unusually nationalist outlook possessed the right skills and determination to piece together a moderate, cross-sectional coalition to oppose the drive for the restriction of slavery in Missouri. The cosmopolitan, conciliatory president combined these personal attributes with a willingness to wield patronage and other more subtle means of executive influence to sway important congressmen to his side.

This approach to the Missouri crisis yields important insights. It focuses attention on the politically vital moderates more than on the headline-grabbing sectionalists, and constitutes a useful corrective to the inordinate attention scholars tend to lavish on the latter. Indeed, Forbes offers valuable individual portraits of the pressures that went into the making of a moderate. Furthermore, it enables Forbes to see private correspondence between the relevant politicians as part of the legerdemain necessary to create the anti-restrictionist coalition. In particular, Forbes offers a wonderful reading of Thomas Jefferson's varying assessments of the dangers the debate posed to the Union. They varied, he astutely concludes, based on the intended audience of the respective letters.

Fixation behind the scenes, however, does have its disadvantages as pursued here; one, perhaps inevitable, is the problem of evidence. Forbes suggests and infers all manner of pressure and leverage and even outright quid pro quos, but never proves any of his allegations. This is largely due to gaps in the paper trail that are the norm when dealing with possibly shady dealings. Moreover, while Forbes adds to our understanding of the Missouri Compromises by his behind-the-scenes insights, he unnecessarily subtracts from his own account the public face of the controversy. "The ceaseless speechifying of the Sixteenth Congress," he categorically declares, "afforded a kind of long-running Washington sideshow to the session's real action over Missouri, which took place in back rooms, saloons, boarding houses, and executive department offices" (p. 91). But, he offers no

reason why one was mere “sideshow” and the other “the real action.” And, after ruling the speeches out, he cannot account for the tactical importance of the speeches themselves. Especially in this situation where the public paid close attention to utterances in Congress, politicians found they could push opponents into awkward backtracking and more advanced positions than they otherwise would have espoused.

A final flaw introduced by putting Monroe front and center is that it does not ring true with the localism of this age. Forbes eagerly quotes Congressman William Plumer Jr. declaring “the influence of the Palace” to be “heavier than the [State] Capitol” in New Hampshire (p. 82). But as useful as this snippet is to Forbes’s emphasis, in chapter 3, Forbes introduces some localist tension by pursuing a state-by-state analysis of the pressures that produced moderate Northern doughfaces. In his narrative, we also see New York politicians obsessed much more with controlling Albany than with increasing their sway in Washington. As the likes of Michael F. Holt have pointed out (in *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* [1999]), to understand antebellum politics, we are best advised to attend to local contexts at least as much as machinations in Washington.

The “aftermath” chapters also highlight one main character: Martin Van Buren. Following Richard D. Brown’s influential article, Forbes depicts Van Buren’s constant scheming and party building as centered on a North-South alliance that would keep antislavery agitation at bay.^[2] Indeed, Van Buren’s drive “to mobilize slaveholders as a political bloc ... constituted the most important reason for the creation of the Second Party System” (p. 8). And this was true throughout the 1820s; for instance, the pure partisan Van Buren set about to destroy the John Quincy Adams administration from its very outset by such means as mobilizing proslavery sentiment in opposition to the Panama Congress. Forbes’s account also suffers from some internal tension on this point. In this narrative, Van Buren appears at some points as one with no “deeply held personal convictions of any kind concerning slavery” (p. 129). But at other times, we read that he “never wavered in his” anti-abolitionist “commitment” (p. 137). This tension is there despite Forbes’s failure to mention Van Buren’s presidential run under the banner of the Free Soil Party in 1848. Nevertheless, Forbes’s picture of Van Buren as consistently proslavery—at least in practice—is certainly no more extreme than other recent historians’ undue emphasis on antislavery men within the Democracy.^[3]

Whatever place and character Van Buren deserves in this drama, one of the main strengths of Forbes’s telling of it is that Missouri is not the last act. He shows how fraught the slavery issue was throughout the much-neglected 1820s, although slavery was usually treated—as in previous decades—as an adjunct to other issues. “Whatever may be the nature of the subject,” South Carolina’s Whitemarsh B. Seabrook accurately fumed in 1825, “slavery, slavery, slavery is there” (p. 195). After reading Forbes’s delineation of how alive and unwell sectionalism surrounding slavery was after the Missouri Compromises, one is led to wonder with him why “virtually every modern account of the politics of the period describes the slavery issue as in a dormant state at the time?” Forbes’s suggested answer is “that current historians anachronistically discount any discussion of slavery”—particularly those “associated with colonization”—before William Lloyd Garrison “as ipso facto conservative ... and unthreatening to the institution” (p. 219). Slaveholders and their allies had no such illusions, in part because, as Forbes points out in another nugget of wisdom, they “possessed no model from modern times of peaceful emancipation of a true slave society,” at least before British emancipation beginning in 1833 (p. 144).

One of the great disappointments of this book, however, is that while we might best see the Missouri crisis as Act 2 of a three-act play, Forbes’s rendering of Act 1 pales in comparison to Acts 2 and 3. While he rightly decries the traditional view of “the Missouri crisis as a full-dress debate over slavery that sprang up out of nowhere, and then submerged just as rapidly,” in this book it essentially springs up out of nowhere (p. 3). Not only is the book’s attention to events before 1819 lacking, but it also repeats the stereotypical view that “the Missouri debates ripped the façade of national consensus from American public life” (p. 5). This represents a failure to benefit from a wealth of literature that has appeared in recent years more fully demonstrating the divisive nature of slavery in national politics before 1819. It represents a disappointment because especially this part of the book offers no improvement over Forbes’s promising 1994 dissertation.^[4]

Forbes’s failure to reframe the book in light of recent literature goes beyond the origins of the Missouri crisis. Arguing mostly with early and mid-twentieth-century historians, he at times sets up straw men with whom to differ. “For generations,” Forbes laments, “the impact of slavery has been written out of American history” (p. 2). That is certainly not the case for current academic Ameri-

can history writing.[5] Yet, Forbes takes this alleged suppression of slavery's centrality and runs with it as "the traditional narrative of the period" that he means to refute (p. 9).

All in all, Forbes has helped to call our attention squarely onto the Missouri crisis, and has offered a bracing interpretation of its course and significance. However, those hoping for an update of Moore that can stand on its own in reshaping our understanding of the origins and consequences of this pivotal moment in American history will not find their hopes fully realized.

Notes

[1]. For other recent examinations of the Missouri crisis, see John Craig Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2007); and Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), esp. chap. 8.

[2]. Richard H. Brown, "The Missouri Crisis, Slavery, and the Politics of Jacksonianism," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 65 (Winter 1966): 55-72. It should be noted that Forbes differs from Brown on the question of whether Jackson's presidential victory in 1828 actually benefited

the South.

[3]. See, in descending order of reasonableness to my mind, Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and The Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Sean Wilentz, "Slavery, Antislavery, and Jacksonian Democracy," in *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800-1880*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 202-223; Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005); and Yonatan Eyal, *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[4]. Robert Pierce Forbes, "Slavery and the Meaning of America, 1819-1837" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1994).

[5]. The literature Forbes bypasses by this statement is vast. But two prominent examples that spring readily to mind are Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*, completed and edited by Ward M. McAfee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Slavery and the Making of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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Citation: Matthew E. Mason. Review of Forbes, Robert Pierce, *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath: Slavery and the Meaning of America*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

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