H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert M. Owens. *Mr. Jefferson's Hammer: William Henry Harrison and the Origins of American Indian Policy.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xxx + 311 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3842-8.

Reviewed by John Bowes
Published on H-SHEAR (February, 2009)
Commissioned by Caleb McDaniel

The Long Arm of Virginia

The person and policies of William Henry Harrison cast a long shadow over the history of Indiana Territory and the enactment of American Indian policy in the early nineteenth century. This is not necessarily the notion that comes to most people's minds when considering the shorter-lived member of the well-known "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" presidential ticket of 1840. Even those who study American Indian history tend to view Harrison only through the lens of one or two of his more notorious treaties and know little about the man himself. In this focused biography from Robert M. Owens, however, the fundamental and far-reaching importance of Harrison during his time as territorial governor becomes clear. Just as important, Owens ably illustrates the manner in which Harrison's Virginia upbringing and republican principles made him "quintessentially American" (p. xvi). Therefore, although the narrative does not always live up to the title of the book, this examination of Harrison's career in Indiana performs a valuable service to those interested in Harrison as an individual as well as the legacy of his actions in the early 1800s.

This is, as Owens states in the introduction, a cultural biography of Harrison that places the man's actions and opinions within the larger context of his Virginia upbringing and contemporary American society. But Virginia truly plays the lead role. Indeed the first sentence of the first chapter is repeated in the last sentence of the book, in which Owens writes simply, "William Henry Harrison was a son of Virginia" (p. 250). As that son, he was heir to all of the strengths and weaknesses shared by his father Benjamin, Thomas Jefferson, and other notables of the Revolutionary generation. William Henry was neither malevolent nor saintly. Instead, he was a Virginia gentleman who "saw his own interests and those of his country as one and the same, and he tried to advance them as best he could" (p. 250).

Rather than presenting a biography encompassing all facets of Harrison's life, Owens focuses on the Indiana years because it was during that time that Harrison had "a much greater impact on American history" (p. xix). Nor is this solely related to the ways in which he, as territorial governor, negotiated numerous treaties and land cessions that paved the way for future expansion and settlement. Most notably, Harrison's legacy also encompasses debates over slavery in the Northwest Territory and the constant dealings with the suspicion and fear of British influence in the region.

The narrative begins with a relatively brief examination of his road to becoming territorial governor. Born to a signer of the Declaration of Independence and bearing a surname that ranked with Lee and Randolph in Virginia politics and society, William Henry had a privileged upbringing. But having arrived in 1773, the young man also came of age at a time when his fortunes would not come through material inheritance and would no longer reside in his home state. Instead, William Henry, like many of his generation, turned his gaze west. At the age of eighteen he gave up the pursuits of medicine and enlisted in the army. His family connections procured him the appointment and his service in Ohio in the 1790s granted him the opportunity for advancement. By 1798 he was the secretary of the Northwest Territory, and in the summer of 1800 he received the appointment as governor of the newly created Indiana Territory.

Harrison served as the governor of Indiana Territory from 1800 to 1812, a period that encompassed a number of critical events. Perhaps most important in the eyes of Owens, however, is the fact that Harrison's first eight years as governor coincided with the two terms of President Thomas Jefferson. According to Owens, the two men maintained a "synergistic relationship" during those two terms (p. 51). It is this relationship that rests behind

the title of the book, for Harrison as governor did his very best to implement Jefferson's principles as they related to the Indians and to western expansion. At their core, Jefferson's intertwined policies depended on an acquisitive benevolence in which the fair treatment of Indians wrestled with an ardent nationalism. And over the course of less than a decade, Harrison displayed his mastery of Jefferson's ideas through strategic negotiations with multiple Indian tribes that transferred millions of acres into American hands.

But Harrison did more than negotiate with Indian tribes over lands. He is also known for his dealings with Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa, the two Shawnee brothers who crafted a confederacy in Indiana Territory through diplomatic and religious means. The circumstances highlighted both the continuing concerns over possible conflicts with Indians and the influence of the British. Owens makes clear from the beginning that the British presence consistently looms over the life of Harrison in that he, like his father's generation, saw British hands in all aspects of Indian resistance to American expansion.

It is when he discusses Harrison's treatment of the Indians and the concerns over the British that Owens is at his strongest. Less seamless are the discussions over slavery. A less known and certifiable low-point of Harrison's governorship rests in his attempts to bypass the Northwest Ordinance's prohibition on slavery in the territory north of the Ohio River. Harrison lobbied hard to allow slavery to exist in Indiana Territory, but was never able to achieve that goal. It is a story that opens an important door into Harrison's beliefs even as it illustrates Owen's fine work with the available documents. But this thread does not always connect as well to the other elements of the narrative. Because of the emphasis on Indian affairs in both the title and, at times, in the book, the discussion of slavery often appears as an intriguing addition to, as opposed to a necessary aspect of, the assessment of Harrison's career.

On the surface, it may seem like a petty comment to say that the book does not follow through on its title. At the same time, however, it would appear that the problem is that the title sells both this book and its namesake short. Harrison is eternally linked to events like the 1804 treaty with the Sauk Indians and the Battle of Tippecanoe. But even as Owens wants to emphasize that aspect of the governor's career, the information provided illustrates that there was much more to this man and his time as the instrument of federal authority in Indiana Territory. Owens has given the reader a narrative that does more than focus on the origins of American Indian policy. This book paints Harrison as hoping to create in Indiana Territory a place that would be familiar and comfortable for a man of his Virginia roots. And that relates to far more than just Indian affairs.

All criticism aside, Owens presents a very readable and enlightening biography of William Henry Harrison. The material is well situated within the historiography and takes advantage of the Harrison papers painstakingly collected by the Indiana Historical Society. It provides valuable insight into the ways in which federal policy worked on the ground through the filters of individual context and local politics. And in very important ways it fleshes out the life of a man who had a far greater impact on early American expansion than many realize.

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: John Bowes. Review of Owens, Robert M., *Mr. Jefferson's Hammer: William Henry Harrison and the Origins of American Indian Policy.* H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. February, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15745

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.