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David Grimsted. *American Mobbing 1828-1861: Toward the Civil War.* New York and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1998. xviii + 372 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-511707-3.

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This book is a comprehensive history of mob violence in the years before the American Civil War. It contends that mob violence was an important outgrowth and manifestation of sectional discord between the North and South in antebellum America. According to David Grimsted, who teaches history at the University of Maryland, "riots were neither rare nor commonplace in antebellum society but a piece of the ongoing process of democratic accommodation, compromise, and uncompromisable tension between groups with different interests" (p. viii).

Grimsted's study evidences a firm grounding in the substantial literature on the subject of violence in America. His work joins that of Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York, 1975), Leonard Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing": Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970), Thomas Rose, ed. *Violence in America: A Historical and Contemporary Reader* (New York, 1970), and other works which focus primarily on violence in the South, such as John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (Cambridge, 1956), Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982), Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery* (Princeton, 1996), Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa, 1988), and Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *Violence and Culture in the Ante-Bellum South* (Austin, 1979).

Grimsted's research is solid and impressive. After combing newspapers, court records, manuscripts, as well as an extensive array of secondary accounts, the author compiled a card file of 1,218 instances of mob activity–both North and South. "This volume," Grimsted contends, "is an attempt to reconstruct about half the riotous conversations between 1828 and 1861, those related to the tragic dialogue leading toward the Civil War. The differing definitions of acceptable mobbing in the North and South contributed substantially to the tensions in the nation's antebellum political system, itself a product of dialogue in which riots at times spoke influentially" (p. viii). Grimsted's painstaking research has produced a vivid, and at times compelling, portrait of antebellum Americans in conflict with one another.

Grimsted divides his study into three major parts with several different chapters in each. Part I, entitled "The North: Fleeing Slavery, Trying Violence" explores mob activity, primarily as it applied to silencing the work of abolitionists. Part II, entitled "The South: Asserting Mastery, Terrorizing Doubt" analyzes the efforts of Southern society to enforce dogmatic beliefs regarding the wisdom of slavery, as well as wholesale attempts to suppress slave insurrection. Part III, entitled "The Nation: Political Affrays and Fraying," analyzes American mobs and riots as they applied to the violence which characterized antebellum politics. In a final chapter entitled, "Bloody Majoritarianism: the Sectional Mob Systems Meet, Mingle, and Mangle," Grimsted examines the Kansas-Nebraska Crisis, within the context of the American proclivity to go to the streets, making the point that here the "two systems of sectional violence met and merged under the uneasy supervision of the federal government" (p. 246). Grimsted's constant theme throughout is that argument over slavery both between and within the sections was the primary cause of mob activity in the United States.

Appropriately, the main text of the book begins in 1835–a year which Grimsted claims represented a "crest of rioting in the United States." Anti-abolitionist riots in the North erupted. The abolitionist mail campaign triggered riots in Charleston and other Southern towns. The work of vigilantes in Mississippi responding to the Murrell slave-stealing conspiracy and the Vicksburg gamblers, in Grimsted's view, "inaugurated" America's most mob-filled year. The example for this mayhem, argues Grimsted, was set by the "slave-driving aristocrat" in the White House. Andrew Jackson's treatment of African and Native Americans, his war against the Bank, his contempt for the traditional political establishment, and his

lack of respect for the law–all set a violent example for other Americans to follow, and they did so by going to the streets. Jackson, according to Grimsted, "was in public life a general, a man trained to act in terms of friends and foes, victories and defeats, rather than in terms of political and diplomatic courtesy and compromise." Jackson was a "bravely determined man certainly, but one who paid little heed to process or legality if they stood in the way of what he thought desirable" (p. 5). Thus Jackson and his movement was the wellspring of violence.

By the end of the year, Grimsted argues, a "significant… solidification of riot patterns" had emerged. "By year's end, two sectional systems of, and attitudes toward, social violence were in place that would mark and deepen all future North-South confrontations…. Property was the object of attack in well over half of the Northern mobs, but persons were what Southern riots aimed at in all but ten or so of the incidents there" (p. 13).

Grimsted makes an interesting point when he argues that mobbing abolitionists was a much more attractive answer than sustained political or journalistic opposition to slavery: "it was quick, it necessitated neither a permanent legal principle nor, politicians hoped, any prolonged wrestling with the issues at stake, and it gave the illusion of directly handling a problem for which there was no legal answer" (p. 22).

While this work adds substantially to our understanding of mob activity as it relates to the sectional dialogue, many readers will find unsettling Grimsted's tendency toward ridicule of those he is supposed to be studying. There is no question who the "good guys" and the "bad guys" are. On many occasions Grimsted's glib and sometimes judgmental prose mars the text. For example, Grimsted rarely questions the earnestness of Northern politicians like Talmadge or Wilmot who spoke out against slavery. These attacks, he argues, despite what some contemporary critics or historians have charged, were seldom politically motivated or self serving, but expressed deeply held moral opposition to slavery. Meanwhile, Grimsted does little to hide his contempt for the South, the Democratic Party, and for Northerners who out of some irrational fear for the future of the Union, rioted against abolitionists. When speaking about insurrection scare riots, Grimsted states, "the South periodically purged its own dark fears, even as it more insistently sang its refrain about happy darkies" (p. xi). Such statements achieve little more than to express the writer's indignation by hindsight. While total objectivity is impossible, and can never be fully achieved, most would agree that it is a goal worth striving for. While no one would argue that historians have a duty to carefully interpret their research in light of their own experiences and best judgments, the tendency to impose modern modes of thought on historical actors is a temptation historians should guard against.

Confronting these issues himself, Grimsted writes, "I've never had much respect either for those self-oblivious historical claims to being 'objective' or 'disinterested' or for those self-serving ones that point out 'its all politics' or 'ideology' to justify pasting on one's own." No one can argue with Grimsted that perfect objectivity in history can never be absolutely achieved. Nor can they quarrel with his assertion that, "People write good history who care most about their topics and bring to them every bit of experience, passion, insight, and commitment they can muster–and who care about and are committed, in a primary way, to honesty, fairness, and deepening, and thus changing, their own understanding" (p. xv). These admirable and indeed wise remarks can not, however, serve to immunize Grimsted from a continual, unsettling tendency in his prose to demean, ridicule, condescend to, and castigate those who in the long view of history were not only wrong, but were in fundamental conflict with our modern societal values.

Even so, in other ways this work is a welcome respite from many of the statistical studies which have appeared recently which explored similar topics. It is written in plain English, is blessedly free of jargon, tables, graphs, statistics, and other tools of social scientific methodology so common in works of this kind. In large part, Grimsted eschews quantitative analysis, claiming he decided early on to "considerize" rather than "computerize" his subject matter. Numbers seldom intrude themselves in the narrative, but when they do they are used to good effect. And, best of all, Grimsted's research base is sound.

Grimsted's work is positive proof that even now it is still possible to offer original insights into the North-South dialogue, the causes of the Civil War, and the eventual break up of the Union. If Grimsted argues a little too strongly for the issue of slavery being the primary concern of most Americans in most circumstances, his work is valuable in many ways. First it is the most comprehensive study yet in print which explores mob activity in America's antebellum years. But mostly *American Mobbing* is valuable for demonstrating in the most comprehensive way yet that the role of mobs and rioting was an important manifestation of sectional discord. Those interested in studying the causes of the Civil War, particularly the on-going political, social, and cultural dialogue

within and between the sections will find this book intriguing.

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