

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Adam Arenson. *The Great Heart of the Republic: St. Louis and the Cultural Civil War.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 340 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05288-8.

Diane Mutti Burke. *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865.* Early American Places Series. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010. xvi + 413 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3636-7; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-3683-1.

Reviewed by Andre M. Fleche

Published on H-CivWar (June, 2011)

Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson

Missouri and the Cultural Civil War

The history of Missouri is intertwined with the history of American expansion, slavery, sectionalism, and the Civil War. In Missouri, more than in any other state, these forces collided in especially complex and contradictory ways. In 1820, the Missouri Compromise granted Missouri statehood, but also sounded the “fire bell in the night” that foretold the fracturing of the Union. During the mid-1850s, proslavery “Border Ruffians” from Missouri helped precipitate the crisis over Bleeding Kansas, but in 1861 antislavery German immigrants in St. Louis helped save their state for the Union. As Adam Arenson notes, “the very name of Missouri” became a “talisman” of American sectional politics (p. 6).

Arenson’s *The Great Heart of the Republic* and Diane Mutti Burke’s *On Slavery’s Border* reveal the fresh and complex insights that close study of Missouri can yield for our understanding of nineteenth-century American history. While these works explore local places, both authors use their case studies to illuminate national trends. Together, they offer a vibrant portrait of mid-nineteenth-century Missouri while also contributing to the historiography of slavery, sectionalism, and the Civil War. They demonstrate the centrality of Missouri to the American experience, and explain why so many nineteenth-century Americans concentrated their hopes, dreams, and fears for the future of the nation on the state situated in the “Great Heart of the Republic.”

Arenson’s book offers a much broader interpretation of the Civil War than a typical work of local history. Rather than provide a comprehensive account of St. Louis’s past, he uses the city’s story to reveal a “nuanced, intimate history of the Civil War era from the heart of the republic” (p. 3). The result is a beautifully written and

strikingly original interpretation of the causes, conduct, and consequences of the war. Like the authors of several recent works, Arenson wishes to reorient the discussion of sectionalism and the Civil War by emphasizing the West’s importance in shaping the conflict. In Arenson’s recounting, the war looks less like a fight between North and South over slavery, and more like a messy struggle between northerners, southerners, and westerners from a variety of ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds. Though a belief in America’s right to expand across the continent united these combatants in the abstract, in actuality they all held competing visions for what Manifest Destiny meant for the future of the country. By situating this struggle in St. Louis, Arenson is able to demonstrate, through close study, precisely how and why divisions developed in a local context, while complicating our understanding of the war in a wider framework. As Arenson writes, “in this largest city along the border of slavery and freedom, the Civil War era looks different: it is a struggle with a different chronology, a different emphasis, different turning points” (p. 5).

Arenson’s narrative is organized around incidents in St. Louis’s past that are especially revealing of national trends. He begins his story with an account of the Great Fire of 1849, which destroyed much of the old French quarter, and allowed the city’s residents to reinvent an American St. Louis. In the chapters that follow, Arenson demonstrates how residents strove to rebuild the city according to their own competing understandings of Manifest Destiny as they attempted to take the lead in developing the new lands of the Mexican cession. Missouri senator Thomas Hart Benton, for example, envisioned a transcontinental railroad running through St. Louis that

would help bind the country by rejecting both abolitionism and the indefinite expansion of slavery. Conservative slaveholders, alarmed by the prospect of becoming encircled by “free soil,” blocked his plans, resulting in a divided Democratic Party. In the years that followed, Unitarian minister William Greenleaf Eliot attempted to bring consensus and culture to St. Louis by establishing a nonsectarian, nonideological institution of higher learning in the city, but his successful founding of Washington University also revealed ethnic tensions between Protestants and Catholics as nativist politics grew in popularity across the country. Another St. Louis resident, the slave Dred Scott, exhibited a different understanding of the meaning of free soil when he sued for his freedom. The results of his case, Arenson shows, would thwart the promise of Manifest Destiny for blacks and many northern whites alike.

In the second half of the book, Arenson demonstrates how these divisions came to a head during the Civil War and Reconstruction. While antislavery Germans struck blows to keep Missouri in the Union, military officials and provost marshals alienated many southern-leaning city residents by enforcing loyalty. In the years after the Civil War, former Confederates and many former Unionists in St. Louis agreed to restrict African American citizenship, while the newly freed slaves acted to gain education and equal rights. In these chapters, Arenson creatively juxtaposes such seemingly incongruent topics as the failure of St. Louis to host Abraham Lincoln’s funeral train with the success of black veterans in founding Lincoln Institute, a campaign for relocation of the nation’s capital to Missouri with the birth of the Liberal Republican movement, and the construction of the city’s Forest Park with calls for “Redemption” and home rule in the South. Arenson concludes with a brief discussion of the 1904 World’s Fair, which highlighted the degree to which, by the twentieth century, contentious memories of the war and emancipation had been forgotten.

Arenson’s work is wide ranging and ambitious, covering art, architecture, and historical memory as well as the history of politics and policy. Most provocatively, Arenson coins the term “the cultural civil war” to characterize the complex conflict that tore St. Louis and the nation apart during the middle of the nineteenth century. Though, for the most part, Arenson is content to leave his definition of “the cultural civil war” more implicit than explicit, it forms the heart of his efforts to reimagine the contours of the sectional conflict. From the perspective of St. Louis, the Civil War was not simply a political struggle between North and South over the future of slavery in the territories. Instead, it involved the aspirations, prej-

udices, and tensions between rival ethnic, racial, and regional groups. “The cultural civil war,” Arenson writes, “was more than just a conflict between North and South, fighting over the West as a prize. The cultural civil war was the clash among three incompatible regional visions, as leaders from the North, South, and West argued about the definition and importance of Manifest Destiny and slavery politics” (p. 2).

Arenson’s book, is, indeed, truly a cultural history rather than a social history or a traditional urban history. Throughout the book, the city of St. Louis works for Arenson as a site and as a metaphor of the American cultural conflict he describes. Scholars seeking statistics, census data, city ordinances, and statutes will find few in Arenson’s work; instead, readers will discover a creative history of mid-nineteenth-century America in microcosm.

Mutti Burke, by contrast, takes us directly into the homes of Missouri’s small-scale slaveholding farmers. Her thoroughly researched and highly detailed book reconstructs the domestic life of slaveholders and slaves living “on slavery’s border” in St. Louis’s hinterlands. Her seven chapters cover every aspect of life and labor on Missouri’s small farms during the nineteenth century. Mutti Burke begins by describing the heavy migration into the state in the post-Louisiana Purchase land boom, skillfully presenting the migration experience from the perspective of both white and black men and women. The chapters that follow consider the domestic world of the white owners, labor practices and routines for whites and blacks in the house and in the field, slave management and negotiation, and the family lives of the enslaved. She concludes with an engaging chapter on the destruction of Missouri’s system of slavery during the Civil War. Mutti Burke considers many topics, including marriage and courtship patterns; child rearing strategies; economic activities; food, clothing, and shelter for whites and blacks; discipline, resistance, and abuse in the house and on the farm; slave sale and flight; and religious practices, kinship networks, and sociability among slaves.

Like Arenson, Mutti Burke uses her local study to address wider historiographical themes and trends. Mutti Burke clearly writes in the tradition of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s classic, *Within the Plantation Household* (1988), but Mutti Burke surpasses Fox-Genovese in considering the topics she addresses from the perspective of both men and women, white and black. Indeed she chooses space and place, not sex and gender, as her main units of analysis. In the words of Mutti Burke, she examines “how the experience of slavery and slaveholding

was influenced both by the size of slaveholding and by geography” (p. 5). As a result, we get an intimate and detailed look at slavery in a border state, and key insights into the lives of the many slaves and slave owners who lived and worked on small farms throughout the South. Among her most notable findings include the importance of renting or “hiring out” slaves as an economic strategy among white small farmers and the prevalence in black family life of the “abroad marriage,” which joined men and women who worked for different owners, leading to near-constant separation. Mutti Burke demolishes the myth of benign border state slavery, but she does find that experiences on small farms “differed socially, politically, and economically from that of plantation regions” (pp. 5-6). Though she rejects idealized portrayals of harmonious domestic relations on small farms, she finds them more “intimate” in a way that exposed “both slaves and owners to a vast array of human exchanges ranging from empathy and cooperation to hatred and brutal violence” (p. 6). In a smaller setting, slaves and owners often knew each other well, at times affording slaves more opportunities to “negotiate” the terms and conditions of their enslavement, but also opening them to abuse and the trauma of betrayal, especially in the case of sale or punishment.

This balance is the strength of Mutti Burke’s work, though it should be noted that she does not explore Missouri’s large slaveholdings or the experiences of slaves living and working in the state’s urban areas. Still, her work is by far the most thorough treatment of slavery in Missouri to date, and the exceptional nuance and detail she brings to her analysis of the master-slave relationship will make it one of the most informative of a short list of works on slavery on small farms and in border states.

Taken together, the works of Arenson and Mutti Burke paint a remarkably complete portrait of Missouri during the Civil War era, and underscore the state’s importance in understanding sectionalism, slavery, and the Civil War. Pairing their admittedly different books also raises a provocative problem. In the end, Arenson and Mutti Burke describe two very different Missouris—one diverse, dynamic, and oriented toward the grandeur and promise of the West, the other domestic, provincial, and tied to the older states of Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee from which so many of Missouri’s slaveholders came. Perhaps the fact that such different worlds existed alongside one another and that people with such disparate lives and values had to struggle for the future of the same state provides the best evidence for the existence of what Arenson has called “the cultural civil war.”

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: Andre M. Fleche. Review of Arenson, Adam, *The Great Heart of the Republic: St. Louis and the Cultural Civil War* and Burke, Diane Mutti, *On Slavery’s Border: Missouri’s Small Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32696>



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