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**James A. Ramage, Andrea S. Watkins.** *Kentucky Rising: Democracy, Slavery, and Culture from the Early Republic to the Civil War.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. 480 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3440-6.

**Reviewed by** Timothy Jenness (Lincoln Memorial University)

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## Henry Clay's Kentucky and the Evolution of Trans-Appalachian America

Kentucky statesman Henry Clay has been lauded by many historians as one of America's leading nationalists during the Republic's early years. Indeed, before fellow Kentuckian Abraham Lincoln's political ascendancy, Clay's presence on the national stage had been permanently etched onto the nation's historical scrolls. Though he was repeatedly denied the presidency, nineteenth-century historians John W. Barber and Henry Howe claimed that the Kentuckian "stands with the nation as one whose affections were filled with the idea of the glory and welfare of the American republic."[1] For James A. Ramage and Andrea S. Watkins, the "national legend" that arose around his name is both the starting point and one of the themes of their recently published collaboration, *Kentucky Rising* (p. 1). Focusing on such topics as Clay's influence, patriotism, Kentuckians' martial spirit and engagement in the democratic process, and class fraternization, Ramage and Watkins argue that between the American Revolution and Civil War, Kentuckians were driven by "the optimistic and hopeful dreams of a rising globally oriented society" (p. 16). These dreams coexisted with a belief system that viewed slavery as a necessary evil; one based on Clay's claim that slavery's status within Kentucky's borders should be determined by Kentuckians. According to the authors, this was "the lodestar that guided Kentucky through the Civil War" (p. 17).

Kentucky's status as a border slave state and role as a key participant in the Ohio River Valley's growing economy make it an important subject for historical analysis. Ramage and Watkins's book is a credible addition to the historiography on the Bluegrass State that includes works by Stephen Aron, John B. Boles, Robert V. Remini, and more recently, Harry S. Laver, Christopher Phillips, and Anne E. Marshall.[2] These historians have offered tremendous insight into the important role Kentucky played in nineteenth-century America. In their fifteen thematic chapters, two of which focus on Clay and three on the Civil War, Ramage and Watkins consider a variety of topics that they believe illustrate the ways in which Kentuckians' lifestyle and priorities reflected their patriotism, self-sacrifice, and belief in liberty, all of which, they argue, pervaded the commonwealth's antebellum heritage. Other topics include art and architecture, the War of 1812 and Mexican-American War, entertainment and culture, religion, women, science, slavery, and, of course, politics.

The book's first two chapters introduce the concrete and mythical nature of Clay's role in Kentucky's and America's history as pivotal to the development of both. For the authors, Clay in many ways was the personification of Kentucky's leading role in white Americans' effort to build a new democratic nation whose frontier was in a constant state of transition. His "American System" of protective tariffs, a national bank, and internal improvements dovetailed nicely with antebellum Lexington's status as the West's leading manufacturing center (p. 17). According to Ramage and Watkins, Clay's economic plans grew out of and "mirrored the hopes of [hemp] manufacturers and investors" in the town (p. 26). Late in life, his standing as a national hero was acknowledged by most contemporaries who, by his death in 1852, were well aware of his Union-saving compromises. Though the authors break little new ground in their assessment of Clay's leadership, they correctly point out that most Kentuckians agreed with his attitude toward slavery. In Clay's view, slavery was evil but necessary

to maintain public safety for all, unless freed slaves were educated or deported from the United States. More important, it was up to the state to determine the institution's status within its borders. His membership in the American Colonization Society was a reflection of his belief that such a policy would provide blacks with the opportunities to which they were entitled. In explaining their decision to focus so much initial attention on the statesman, Ramage and Watkins argue that his spirit and national ideals lived on in the national public memory. Clay and Kentucky, they suggest, were synonymous and were remembered together as "champions of the Union" (p. 56). In subsequent years, Kentucky would adhere to his views on slavery, states' rights, opposition to emancipation, and the enlistment of black troops, although George Prentice, the editor of the *Louisville Daily Journal*, believed that Clay would never have betrayed the Union.

The authors' title, *Kentucky Rising*, suggests their belief that the commonwealth played a leading role in the nation's development. In that context, chapter 3 focuses on the growth of art and architecture in the state. As the center of the arts community during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Lexington attracted some of the region's finest artists. Painter Matthew Harris Jouett distinguished himself in portraits and miniatures, John James Audubon focused on the sketching of birds, Joel Tanner Hart carved sculptures of Cassius M. Clay and Andrew Jackson, and Benjamin Latrobe became a prominent architect. Ramage and Watkins argue that the state's growth in population, turnpikes, and later railroads "facilitated the exchange of ideas and materials" (p. 79). In so doing, they link the growth of Kentucky's native culture to the nation's development.

Chapters 4 and 6 explore the relationship between politics, economics, and culture. Kentucky's budding democracy reflected not only the importance citizens placed on participation in the public arena, as witnessed by voter turnouts that frequently surpassed 70 percent, but also the degree to which Kentuckians' behavior paralleled that of their fellow Americans. Arguing that the measure of a state's influence was met by its ability to produce leaders, Ramage and Watkins point out that "national political leaders frequently looked to Kentucky for qualified men to lead the nation" (pp. 84-85). In this regard, though, one wonders about the degree to which Kentucky was really unique given the plethora of leaders Virginia and Massachusetts provided during the same period.[3] Nonetheless, Clay's American System, they argue, benefited everyone, especially after the Louisiana Purchase permanently opened the Mississippi River. The changes wrought by steamboats, for instance, enabled politicians and entertainers to bring their agendas and performances to people on the frontier. For "garrulous and socially minded" Kentuckians who took advantage of the changing environment, class fraternization was a natural byproduct (p. 129). As early as 1817, Kentuckians attended theatrical and music performances where exposure to great composers, such as Beethoven and Mozart, further broadened their horizons and enabled them to brush shoulders with other social classes. As the authors put it, settlers came to Kentucky for a better life, but they continued to identify with the East from where they came and to participate "in European and global culture" (p. 147).

In chapters on the War of 1812 and Mexican-American War, Ramage and Watkins delve into the nature of Kentuckians' famous martial spirit, a legacy of military tradition, they argue, that can be traced back to the commonwealth's frontier era. The courage and élan of Kentucky's militia in such engagements as the Battle of the Thames during the War of 1812 and the Battle of Buena Vista during the Mexican-American War served to solidify Kentucky's reputation despite disparaging remarks by General Andrew Jackson after the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. The authors argue that many Kentuckians supported the Mexican conflict, in part, because it was the desire of younger men "to gain personal honor by identifying with the Kentucky tradition of patriotism and honor through military service" (p. 171). It should be pointed out, however, that similar attitudes could be found in other southern states. The martial tradition was alive and well across the South throughout the antebellum period.

Ramage and Watkins contend that religion played a central role in Kentuckians' lives. By the early nineteenth century, the Second Great Awakening had engulfed the commonwealth, converting many people and diversifying American Protestantism in the process.[4] The authors point out that the revivalism split the Presbyterians even as it benefited the Baptists and Methodists because they tended to be more democratic than other denominations. In Kentucky, blacks and whites usually worshiped together, although they were segregated with blacks sitting in the back of the church or the balcony. Ramage and Watkins argue that the growth of black Baptist churches was a direct result of the tremendous growth in black membership in predominantly white churches. Church membership, they aver, enabled both blacks and white women to step out from underneath the patriarchal dom-

ination of white men.

Two chapters on science seek to support the authors' emphasis on Kentucky's leadership during the nation's early years. The creation of Transylvania University, for example, reflected Kentuckians' "forward-thinking vision," in part, because it was the first university west of the Appalachians (p. 193). In Ramage and Watkins's view, this vision was consistent with the same positive outlook Clay had for national development. After a medical school opened in Louisville in the 1830s, Kentucky took the lead in medical and scientific research, as medical professors sought innovations in smallpox vaccination, surgical anesthesia, and quinine treatment for fevers.

The book's final five chapters focus on slavery and the Civil War. Kentucky's version of the institution, like that in other slave states, was influenced by both location and economy. As in other border states, slavery did not dominate Kentucky's labor force because cotton, rice, and sugar were not profitable. Many bondsmen resided on small farms where they tended to live and work alongside their masters cultivating hemp, the state's most important cash crop. Kentucky chattels endured a variety of abuses similar to those faced by their brethren farther south. Despite strong antislavery sentiment, Kentuckians passionately defended their labor system. Unlike much of the slaveholding South where, beginning in the 1830s, people came to see slavery as a "positive good," Kentuckians continued to view the institution as a "necessary evil" until the Civil War. According to Ramage and Watkins, this enabled them to hold conflicting views and created other challenges. Such a view, they argue, essentially led to political inertia because "it prevented a change in attitude regarding slavery that led to definitive action" (pp. 258-259). Colonization was a popular cause in the 1830s and 1840s but white citizens opposed immediate emancipation because of the potential havoc it would bring to the economy. Conservative opponents of slavery preferred gradual emancipation, but such leaders as Cassius M. Clay, Henry's cousin, failed to gain many converts to the cause. Fears of a race war also hindered the effectiveness of emancipationists' arguments. Divisions among the state's white citizenry doomed emancipation until the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified in 1865.

Kentucky's location on the border enhanced its importance to the Union war effort, particularly in 1861 when the attack on Fort Sumter threw the Ohio River Valley into turmoil. Like the rest of the Upper South, it was hopelessly divided–forty thousand men fought for the Confederacy and more than one hundred thousand wore Union blue. President Lincoln handled his native state carefully during the war's early months, yet as the conflict progressed, it became a stated goal of Union commanders to win Kentuckians' hearts. They embarked on a "pacification program" that Ramage and Watkins argue had the opposite effect among many Kentuckians. Efforts to stamp out political dissent, even after Kentucky had clearly decided to remain loyal, incensed many people. The Emancipation Proclamation and enlistment of black troops made it appear to Kentuckians that Confederate charges were right–Lincoln was indeed an abolitionist. The authors assert that there were four reasons why Kentuckians opposed emancipation: racial prejudice, their belief that they had already decided the issue during the 1849 Constitutional Convention, black enlistment offended white Kentuckians' honor and manhood, and the Union's use of black troops made Kentuckians look like cowards. After the war, such views would help to make Kentucky one of the staunchest defenders of the "Lost Cause."

*Kentucky Rising* offers a readable survey of the commonwealth's role in the formative years of the American Republic. Nonetheless, several criticisms should be noted. The dearth of consulted manuscript sources is puzzling, particularly given the rich collections at such repositories as the Filson Historical Society. More generally, the book is a bit too celebratory and tends to overly elevate Kentucky's contributions to the nation. One wonders, for instance, how the state could be both "quite provincial" and able to think "globally in terms of the world market" (p. 141). The authors seem to suggest that Kentuckians' martial tradition was stronger or more pervasive than in the rest of the South, an argument that is not particularly convincing. There are sweeping statements that appear designed to address Kentucky's distinctiveness but, in fact, do quite the opposite; for instance: "Slave owners in Kentucky often viewed themselves as benevolent masters who provided for their slaves from birth to death" (p. 242). While true, such a view was typical of most slaveholders across the South and not one that was unique to Kentucky. Furthermore, in discussing the black community, Ramage and Watkins fail to address adequately slavery's regional variations within the commonwealth. Did differences in the institution exist between the Ohio River counties and the counties along the Tennessee line? What about disparities between urban and rural areas? Interestingly, they note that historians have often debated the

"humanity" of Kentucky's slave system vis-à-vis the rest of the South, yet no answer is really provided. Finally, the authors claim that their state's "deep commitment to democracy was manifest in the mass public meetings of protest or support that were so powerful" in the nation's early years (p. 337). Again, Kentucky's experience was relatively typical as Americans everywhere began to more fully understand and appreciate the political framework created by the Founding Fathers. Despite these criticisms, *Kentucky Rising* affords those interested in Kentucky history an enjoyable read.

Notes

[1]. John W. Barber and Henry Howe, *The Loyal West in the Times of the Rebellion; also, Before and Since: Being an Encyclopedia and Panorama of the Western States, Pacific States and Territories of the Union* (Cincinnati: F. A. Howe, 1865), 101.

[2]. See Stephen Aron, *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); John B. Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976); Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991); Harry S. Laver, *Citizens More Than Soldiers: The Kentucky Militia and Society in the Early Republic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Christopher Phillips, " 'The Chrysalis State': Slavery, Confederate Identity, and the Creation of the Border South," in *Inside the Confederate Nation: Essays in Honor of Emory M. Thomas*, ed. Lesley J. Gordon and John C. Inscoe (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); and Anne E. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

[3]. Vice Presidents Richard M. Johnson and John C. Breckinridge, Senators Henry Clay and John J. Crittenden, Speaker of the House Linn Boyd, and President Zachary Taylor, not to mention Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, were either born in Kentucky or grew up there.

[4]. See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) for an excellent analysis of the links between democracy and Christianity in the early nineteenth century.

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