

# H-Net Reviews

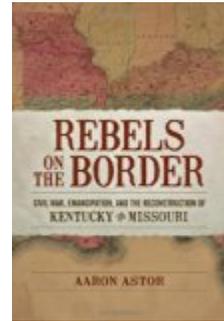
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Aaron Astor. *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012. 360 pp. \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-4298-1.

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## The Center Cannot Hold

Over the past few years, historians have turned a fresh eye toward the Civil War in the border states in a renewed attempt to make sense of such a contested and complex terrain. In his book, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri*, Aaron Astor brings together a rich collection of sources to present a well-researched and nuanced portrait of a region defined by division. On the surface, this book might appear as yet another iteration of border state politics and their significance in the Civil War. Fortunately, Astor explodes these superficial concerns by crafting a detailed narrative of blurred allegiances and evolving connectors. The title, too, is sly, at once matter-of-fact and yet revealing as Astor consistently wrenches out various implications from what constitutes a “rebel” and a “border.” Through a combination of primary source analysis—especially some detailed census work—as well as a careful consideration of the secondary literature, Astor provides an intricate and often engaging study of a region defined by political and cultural divisions. Astor shows just how central the role of slavery was to the border states and offers a strong corrective to the casual assessment that unionism, in all of its myriad strains, served as a fated path towards racial conciliation and tolerance. Instead, Astor argues, this apparent consensus of unionism masked deeply divisive and ambivalent attitudes held towards African Americans, labor relationships, and political ideologies within the border states.

There is much to recommend about *Rebels on the Bor-*

*der*. One of the early points Astor makes is that slaveholders in Kentucky and Missouri pursued relationships with the white, nonslaveholding population, leading to a rather rickety coalition of slavery defenders defined by white supremacy and mixed labor arrangements. This theme of fluidity courses through much of the book and helps complicate the historiography of border states and the Civil War. Much of Astor’s book relates to the social revolution within these states as “rebels” of various stripes—conservative unionists, Confederate guerillas, and African Americans—struggled to gain power. “The social order,” Astor writes, “based on slavery, community, and kin ties shattered amid a burgeoning guerilla insurgency and the complete rejection of slaveholders’ authority by the slave population” (p. 120). This period of flux gave rise to a contentious aftermath and one of the strengths of Astor’s work is the broadening of our understanding of postwar violence in the region. The confluence of politics, race relations, land disputes, honor culture, and issues of control created a volatile situation, especially when combined with white supremacy. Ultimately, *Rebels on the Border* is a story of identity, and Astor weaves this motif throughout the book as Missourians and Kentuckians fought to make sense of their shattered lives and to construct a new world around their particular ideals.

Astor’s *Rebels on the Border* is not without flaws, however, and though much of the book’s strengths stem from his focus on fluidity and ambiguity within this mid-

dle ground, his writing can be strained at times as he swims within these shades of gray. Some politicians are thus “somewhat less moderate” than others; certain situations show that “pragmatism trumped honor”; and more unfortunately, a “relative powerlessness” prevented slaves from shaping their own lives (pp. 41, 50, 66). Some of this ambiguity is a byproduct of Astor’s delving into the middle ground of border state politics, but it also mars what is generally a very astute and careful study. More substantially, the book also suffers from a few missed opportunities, especially in terms of racial consciousness as well as the Lost Cause. Astor touches on a growing racial consciousness in Missouri and Kentucky, but a larger discussion of this theme—or at least the inclusion of specific individuals to illustrate this point—would expand the narrative as well as complement the political shifts he so clearly documents. Similarly, his brief discussion of the Lost Cause could be developed further, especially as he tends to come at the historiography from a unique angle.

These criticisms aside, Astor offers a generally refined look at clashing political and racial ideologies that helped shape a contentious and divided region. Astor’s book is a vivid reminder that the concept of unionism was notoriously ill-defined and encompassed many voices, and this ambiguity ultimately frames his story of the destruction of conservative unionism and its (d)evolution into a postwar Confederate apologia. To this end, Astor’s argument has several long-range consequences, particularly in terms of his idea of “belated Confederates”—unionists in the area who constructed their own warped memories of the war once they realized their earlier conservatism had drifted towards a support of biracial citizenship. A fascinating and sobering view of shifting memories during Reconstruction, Astor’s study goes a long way to complicate and drive forward the entire field of border state studies. Overall, Astor maintains a keen analytical focus on a slippery subject and in doing so provides us with an engaging and meaningful take on Kentucky and Missouri during the Civil War era.

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