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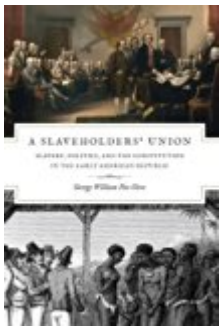

George Van Cleve. *A Slaveholders' Union: Slavery, Politics, and the Constitution in the Early American Republic.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 408 pp. $22.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-84670-5.

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Published on H-South (March, 2013)

Commissioned by David Carlson (Troy University)

George Van Cleve's *A Slaveholders' Union* has been well and incisively reviewed since it first appeared three years ago in 2010. Since it has received considerable attention, including a careful analysis from David Waldstreicher in *Reviews in American History*, I will briefly summarize the argument and then seek to place the book in broader historical and historiographical context.[1] For in the past decade a generation of younger scholars has been rightly taking slavery in the early republic very seriously, and with Van Cleve joining this group it will be useful to take stock.

Van Cleve's is a relentless thesis relentlessly argued. Plain and simple: virtually everything that happened in politics that mattered in the half-century after 1770 was either said or done to defend slavery, was in reaction to slavery, and ultimately served to advance slavery, in part because those who should have done more and known better did not do much of anything meaningful to confront slavery. The movement for independence really grew quite serious after *Somerset v. Stewart* (1772) which, Van Cleve argues, seriously rendered slave property unsafe within the British Empire, something that British North American slave-owners recognized. It is an intriguing claim, and is certainly growing in popularity. At a conference at Columbia a few years ago I watched the rather odd couple of Paul Finkleman and Jonathan Israel agree that the American Revolution was essentially a preemptive strike against the implications of the *Somerset* decision.

Van Cleve does not go quite that far, but he also does not address questions begged by emphasizing *Somerset v. Stewart* or provide enough evidence to persuade me. There is no juicy supply of extensive contemporary statements saying that potential revolutionaries understood the *Somerset* case as meaning what Van Cleve says it means, or suggesting that it was uppermost in their minds. And of course even if it was, it could at best only partly explain why some Southern planters joined an already extensive imperial crisis that had started, and remained hottest, in Massachusetts, and really Boston. And of course

the West Indian planters, no doubt as they always did weighing all the pros and cons, felt it was safest to stay within the empire, as indeed it was for the next sixty years, and at the end they received compensation. Van Cleve's discussion could have benefited from the work of Jack Greene and July Flavell.[2] Both have shown, in different ways, that by the 1770s many Britons had come to identify North America as the place where white people who were a bit less than fully British owned slaves, a belief that also allowed them to view Britain as morally and ethically superior. As a result, it was easier to start seeing American colonists as not fully in possession of British liberties and rights, but such thinking served to reinforce the view of the colonies as a place where forceful policy could be imposed on both the free and the slave.

In Van Cleve's discussion, the Articles of Confederation government was as weak and decentralized as it was so that it could not interfere with slavery. The Constitution was stronger and less decentralized because the Articles could not provide the conditions slave-owners needed to flourish. From 1787, at least, Van Cleve argues for serious sectional conflict and the growing hostility between free and slave states. Yet at the same time, Van Cleve dismisses any position or action that appears to be antislavery as simply proof that slavery no longer mattered materially to the person or group proposing or taking it, and he suggests that Southerners could always get their way because they cared far more about protecting and expanding slavery than Northerners did about challenging or limiting it. Southern elites thought solely as slave-owners, and would stop at nothing and would threaten everything to make slavery's triumph inevitable and inexorable. They rendered disgusting the nation's founding documents by saturating them with defenses of slavery and forced them to become mere instruments to advance Southern interests. Yet, at the same time Van Cleve seems to suggest that their unceasing efforts were unnecessary, for it also seems that nobody in the North really cared much that Southerners owned more and more slaves. Either slavery was the central contentious issue, all slavery all the time, or people were so racist and indifferent that its future did not really matter to them. Van Cleve argues both, and often nearly simultaneously. The tension between these two claims--heated sectional hostility and Northern indifference--culminates with Van Cleve's discussion of the Missouri Crisis. He argues that a Northern restrictionist coalition, seemingly antislavery on grounds that included moral condemnation, quickly crumbled once what Van Cleve identifies as their racist, free labor values were assured north of 36 degrees 30 minutes. Thus Southern planters ruled the roost, though it remains unclear whether they managed to do so because of their raw power and Machiavellian brilliance, or because their vital interests did not really bother anybody else that much.

Clearly slavery was highly significant before the years of immediate abolitionism, the gag rule, and the crumbling of the second party system. Van Cleve is right to insist that we know that. And he joins a group of highly talented historians my age and younger, which includes John Craig Hammond, Matthew Mason, Eva Sheppard Wolf, Padraig Riley, and Nicholas Wood, among others, who are ensuring that we will continue to know it. Each of these historians is exploring, in their myriad ways, how slavery was both shaping and shaped by the politics and economics of the late colonial, revolutionary, and early national periods. But these scholars are not all approaching this crucial issue in the same way, and Van Cleve's treatment needs the corrective of John Craig Hammond's important new work. Hammond, in a brilliant essay published in the ***Journal of the Early Republic***, has taken the long and imperial view of slavery in North America, thus adding considerable chronological heft to his excellent 2007 book.[3] Hammond provides a much broader and more expansive understanding of the slaveholders' union and the consolidation of slave regimes west

of the Appalachians than does Van Cleve. At the same time, Hammond also provides a much more careful and locally oriented understanding of the rise and development of slave societies. Essentially, Hammond shows that slavery in the early American republic was the result of centuries-long competition in North America fueled by French, Spanish, and British imperial ambitions. At the same time, he demonstrates that how, where, and why slavery came to any particular place had everything to do with bottom-up, local decision-making where those, for example, living in and around New Orleans or in Kentucky determined in what form and whether slavery would come to the locality. Hammond's work shows that Van Cleve's discussion is at once too narrow while also not possessing the virtues that a careful focus on the local and particular can often yield.

The result is an argument that is inflexible and overdetermined. Unchanging beliefs and a static vision of slavery shape the motives of the actors in Van Cleve's study from the 1770s, and certainly from 1787, to 1820. And what happened in the period covered by his book makes the period from 1820 to Fort Sumter mere commentary. From 1820, Van Cleve's final chapter suggests, violent sectional conflict was inevitable. Far too early, Van Cleve speaks of an antislavery North shaped by free labor ideology, seemingly yet another body of static belief available in 1800, 1820, and 1850, and makes sectional conflict over slavery the only significant matter in early national political life. But the first phase of the new nation's serious westward expansion into newly acquired western territory, which occurred from roughly 1810 to 1820, happened in a vastly different world than the second serious phase of expansion into recently acquired or settled territory, which took place from about 1848 to 1858. The years between 1819 and 1846 saw the nation experience its first two major economic depressions, which rubbed raw the contradictions inherent in simultaneously seeking a yeoman's republic while so completely encouraging the acquisitive potential of a republican citizenry. The three decades after 1819 led many Northerners to see threats to a yeoman's republic of household independence that could not have been understood prior to those three decades because the conditions that existed in 1846 did not exist in 1820.

In 1820, as Van Cleve acknowledges, thought mostly to castigate and not to understand, most citizens in Northern states did not believe that slavery expanding south of 36 degrees, 30 minutes would threaten their yeoman's republic. More concerning to them was what the late Richard Ellis called "aggressive nationalism" and the implications of the Panic of 1819 (a profoundly significant event that Van Cleve never mentions).[4] The next two decades produced a politics that took seriously the questions about national authority and economic development. This politics resulted, in highly complex ways, by the end of the 1840s in a free soil and free labor ideology broad and vague enough that it could paper over serious cracks and speak to the immediate needs of the constituents of both Martin Van Buren and Abraham Lincoln. By 1848 a majority of Northern citizens had no doubt that allowing slavery to spread anywhere threatened their aspirations. Yet this profound shift in thinking from 1820 resulted in part because the highly aggressive Jacksonian response to rising national authority and policies of rapid economic development had not prevented the vast social and economic transformation of Northern society. Put simply, the contradictions of the free labor ideology were much more apparent by 1848 than they had been in 1820. But that led to a Republican response whereby the free labor ideology was more coherently and insistently articulated (it was not a coherent ideology during the period of Van Cleve's book), and it also made the need to get resources, any resources, all the greater and more desperate. The South had been able to think like a desperate region much earlier than the North could. The North could finally match the South for desperation by the end of the 1840s. All of this is by way

of saying that the years after 1820 deserve their history, which, following the implications of Van Cleve's study, they would be denied.

The new history of slavery in the early American republic, an historiography in which Van Cleve certainly has a place, has forever shattered the claim that slavery was insignificant to the central issues, concerns, and politics of the early national period in the years before 1831. The scholars who have produced this historiography have allowed us to see the history of slavery in the early years of the early republic on its own terms. It would be an unfortunate irony if their success led us to deny to the period in which Nat Turner revolted, William Lloyd-Garrison published ***The Liberator***, the economy fell apart in a savage nine-year depression, and citizens rushed across the continent, often driven by fearful anxiety, its own history on its own terms. The historians of the slavery of the earlier part of the early American republic rightly demand that each period be granted its history. Let it be so.

Notes

[1]. David Waldstreicher, "Too Big to Fail: So Blame the Critics Early Republic Style," ***Reviews in American History*** 40 (2012): 52-56.

[2]. Jack P. Greene, "Empire and Identity from the Glorious Revolution to the American Revolution," in ***Oxford History of the British Empire: The Eighteenth Century,*** ed. P. J. Marshall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 208-230; Julie Flavell, ***When London Was Capital of America*** (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

[3]. John Craig Hammond, "Slavery, Settlement, and Empire: The Expansion and Growth of Slavery in the Interior of the North American Continent, 1770-1820," ***Journal of the Early Republic*** 32 (2012): 1770-1820; Hammond, ***Slavery Freedom and Expansion in the Early American West*** (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

[4]. Richard E. Ellis, ***Aggressive Nationalism: McCulloch v. Maryland and the Foundation of Federal Authority in the Young Republic*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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Citation: Andrew Shankman. Review of Van Cleve, George. *A Slaveholders' Union: Slavery, Politics, and the Constitution in the Early American Republic.* H-South, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

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