



Ellen Eslinger. *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999. xxi + 306 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-033-7.

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Camp Meetings and the Kentucky Frontier

In her insightful study of religious revivals in early Kentucky, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism*, Ellen Eslinger informs her readers that her work rests on “two fundamental insights” (p. xiii). The first is that the Kentucky of 1800, the Kentucky swept by religious revivals, bore little resemblance to its frontier beginnings—to the frontier as it became codified by Frederick Jackson Turner. The second is that camp meeting revivalism significantly differed from both earlier and later manifestations of evangelical religion. By defining her study as she does, Eslinger attempts to place it between what she considers two extremes. The first consists of those studies placing primary importance for the camp meeting movement on the frontier environment of the west. The second consists of those studies disregarding the frontier influence too fully, studies placing the revivals in the broader context of the development of southern culture or the wave revivals among Scots-Irish Presbyterians on both sides of the Atlantic. Eslinger wishes to re-establish a connection between the frontier and camp meeting revivalism without retreating into Turner’s ideas about the influence of the frontier. With a clear methodological debt to anthropologist Victor Turner, especially to his concept of the “*communitas*,” Eslinger succeeds in providing a close analysis of the Kentucky camp meeting movement that deepens our understanding of the movement’s use of ritual. While the study is not, finally, as radical a departure as the “Introduction” might imply, it is, nonetheless, a very readable, well-researched, and worthwhile book.

Although it is not indicated in either the title or subtitle, *Citizens of Zion* is about Kentucky. In fact, seven of the nine chapters deal with the settlement and development of Kentucky in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In Part I, Eslinger writes of the years of settlement. In Part II (containing six of the book’s nine chapters), Eslinger examines life in Kentucky from a variety of perspectives. After writing of the economic development

of Kentucky, Eslinger writes of the various ways society in Kentucky organized itself. Her examination of local politics—both inside and outside of Kentucky’s churches—may seem as though it is off the subject, but this examination is actually crucial for the examination of the camp meeting movement to follow. The first two parts of the book are very well researched, well grounded in both primary and secondary source material. Both sections are also well written and contain clear and important notes. Readers drawn to the title of the book, however, who expect to read solely about the camp meeting movement will need to adjust their expectations fairly quickly.

Part III of Eslinger’s study will be the most interesting to scholars of American religion, for it is here that Eslinger offers her interpretation of Kentucky’s camp meeting movement. Chapter eight, “Spiritual Awakening,” offers the clearest critique of the frontier influence on the camp meeting movement. Eslinger convincingly argues that revivalistic religion did not provide frontier settlers with the social structure lacking in other parts of their lives. Rather, the camp meeting movement both built on and revised the church structures already in place among Protestant denominations in Kentucky. By illustrating how the camp meeting content and format interacted with the existing structures in the Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist denominations, Eslinger demonstrates that social structures were being altered rather than created.

In chapter nine, “The Social Significance of Camp Meeting Revivalism,” Eslinger displays her methodological framework most clearly. While the chapter is the most significant interpretive chapter in the book, it is also the most problematic. Eslinger explores revivalism as an expression of Victor Turner’s idea of “*communitas*.” According to Eslinger, *communitas* can be defined as “the quality of intense, ritually generated, and usually brief human interconnection” (p. 225). Camp meetings developed, as Eslinger clearly illustrates, not from weekly

church services but from the occasional meetings such as the Methodist Quarterly Meeting. This allowed the camp meeting to develop into an expression of *communitas* as Turner defines it. In her analysis, Eslinger has provided a fascinating new way to see camp meetings.

Chapter nine is problematic because Eslinger seems to argue that, after all, camp meetings were an expression of frontier culture. She simply desires to offer a different understanding of that frontier culture than the one used by Turner. This is a valuable contribution to the study of American religion, but it may not be the radical departure Eslinger hints at in the introduction.

Overall, Eslinger has offered a detailed analysis of the culture of early Kentucky and that culture's relationship to the camp meeting movement. Her careful analysis complicates our vision of the past and thus offers us an opportunity to think about that past in a more complete way. Only the rarest works of history do more than this.

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