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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.

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In *Kentucky Rising*, James A. Ramage, Regents Professor of History at Northern Kentucky University, and his daughter, Andrea S. Watkins, assistant professor of history at the same institution, offer a synthesis of Kentucky's history between 1800 and 1865. Their book ranges widely over the political, social, and cultural history of the state in these years, arguing that Kentucky stood on the forefront of the nation before the Civil War, its citizens embracing a global and optimistic outlook that ensured the state's economic growth, intellectual and cultural vitality, and national political influence. Ramage and Watkins's glowing portrait of antebellum Kentucky seems worlds away from the state's present-day national notoriety for reactionary politicians, museums devoted to fake science, and rural poverty. But it also seems fairly distant from descriptions offered by many nineteenth-century observers of the state. Most famously, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that by 1830 the population of the state of Ohio, founded twelve years after its southern neighbor, exceeded Kentucky's population by 250,000. He attributed this relative decline directly to slavery. The slaves "charged with exploiting the natural riches of the soil," Tocqueville argued, "have neither enthusiasm nor enlightenment; while those who could have these two things do nothing or go into Ohio in order to make use of their industry and to be able to exercise it without shame."[1] In the face of such evidence, Ramage and Watkins struggle mightily to portray a modernizing and forward-looking antebellum Kentucky. But their reliance on a weak and parochial state-level historiography and reluctance to compare developments in the state to those in the rest of the nation undermines their case for the state as uniquely "rising."

Ramage and Watkins open *Kentucky Rising* in predictable fashion, with two chapters devoted to four-time presidential candidate and native son Henry Clay. They portray Clay as an American hero, by 1850 second in stature only to George Washington, and a politician whom Americans viewed as selfless and above party, committed to national economic development and the sanctity of the Union. The authors speculate that if Clay had lived he would have followed Abraham Lincoln's path in the Civil War and rejected slavery in favor of the Union, though they also note that many white Kentuckians saw themselves as adhering to Clay's example when they rejected emancipation and black troops. The contrast points to the senator's conflicted legacy for the state. Though committed to the Union, Clay failed to take substantive steps to dismantle the "evil" institution that by 1850 most divided the nation, because for him and the vast majority of white Kentuckians slavery and white supremacy stood at the center of their conception of the Union. Thus, when the war came many Kentuckians opposed secession precisely because they believed that remaining within the Union offered the best protection for their slave property.

Ramage and Watkins underestimate white Kentuckians' attachment to slavery largely because they embrace historian Harold Tallant's thesis that most white Kentuckians deemed slavery as an "evil necessity," an unwanted and even immoral institution, but one that they could not abandon without the prospect of social disorder and race war. Tallant's thesis highlights the fact that in Kentucky–almost alone in the South after 1830–a few opponents of slavery, often at great personal risk, openly critiqued the institution. But Tallant's book *Evil Necessity: Slavery and Political Culture in Antebellum Kentucky* (2003) also minimizes–as do Ramage and Watkins–white Kentuckians' deep investment in slavery. Though largely lacking the large plantations of the Deep South, Kentucky had, as the authors note, more slaveholders than all other southern states but Virginia and Georgia. Moreover, the interstate slave trade–to which the authors devote only four pages–ensured a steady flow of capital into the state that helped spark economic development. Meanwhile, the enslaved population continued to grow throughout the antebellum era (though by 1860 it fell as a percentage of the total population to one-fifth). In

short, Kentucky, like much of the South, had chosen a regional route to economic modernity, one in which slavery played an essential role. Many recent scholars of the South–Robert H. Gudmestad, Stephen Deyle, L. Diane Barnes, and Tom Downey, among them–have described how white southerners forged a political economy in which slavery served as the basis for economic development. White Kentuckians' overwhelming support for proslavery state constitutions–in 1792, 1799, and again in 1850–revealed how fully they embraced the idea of a diversified, slave-based economy. Unfortunately, *Kentucky Rising* largely overlooks this recent historiography of the antebellum South. Instead, the authors argue that slavery and the internal divisions caused by the institution during the Civil War ultimately "destroyed much of the progress" that the state had achieved before 1860 (p. 96). But this conclusion disregards how much of the state's "progress" depended on slavery and thus how committed to retaining the institution white Kentuckians remained.[2]

Similar problems undermine Ramage and Watkins's contention that Kentucky stood at the center of the nation's antebellum political, cultural, intellectual, and scientific achievements. Failing to place Kentucky in a broader national context, their claims that the state served as a leader in a variety of endeavors remain unsupported. In their embrace of progress and development, white Kentuckians at best shared national traits, and in many areas they trailed other "rising" states. In the realm of education, for example, Kentucky's children–like those throughout the antebellum South–lagged behind many of their northern neighbors until the mid-1850s, and the state suffered from high illiteracy rates, belying Ramage and Watkins's claims that antebellum Kentuckians shared a strong "belief in education" (p. 2). And, of course, "public" education, when it came, extended only to white residents. Ramage and Watkins's claims about the intellectual, scientific, and artistic accomplishments of antebellum Kentuckians suffer from a similar lack of contextualization. The authors describe well the work of Kentucky-based painters and architects (labeling the state a place "where artists found a home" [p. 60]), scientists, and doctors, but they provide little analysis that would enable readers to understand the place and significance of these works and individuals within the broader American cultural and intellectual landscape. White Kentuckians, in short, may well have shared a patriotic, "optimistic, forward-looking spirit," but they certainly did not stand apart from or above the rest of the nation in this, as any number of foreign travelers, de Tocqueville among them, observed (p. 235).[3]

As befits a survey, Ramage and Watkins offer a broad coverage of Kentucky antebellum history, but subjects of central importance–at least to historians writing about antebellum America in the last thirty years–garner only passing notice. Watkins wrote a fine dissertation about southern patriarch Robert Wickliffe and the changing nature of the southern family, but this subject gets little attention in *Kentucky Rising*. Likewise, women receive only a brief mention, largely in the context of religious revivalism, and gender none at all. According to the authors, class conflict essentially did not exist in a state in which "political leaders were ... genuinely humane" and "Henry Clay's American System" provided "opportunity for all persons in all levels of society" (p. 96). One wonders, if Clay's political economy had such universal benefits, why so many small farmers and tradesmen throughout the state and nation persistently voted for Jacksonian Democrats vehemently opposed to Whiggish economic plans. And did free and enslaved African Americans see antebellum Kentucky as a land of opportunity? Ramage and Watkins also offer a brief description of the Great Awakening in Kentucky, arguing that the revivals gave rise to extensive religious diversity in the state. But readers never learn why Kentucky became the site of some of the new nation's first evangelical revivals, nor do they learn how white Kentuckians' religiosity shaped the state's antebellum history. For example, Ramage and Watkins say little about the relationship between white Kentuckians' religious beliefs and their attitudes toward slavery, science, political life, and the coming and course of the Civil War. Historians of the Whig Party, such as Daniel Walker Howe, have rooted Whiggery's optimistic commitment to progress in the rise of evangelicalism, but in Ramage and Watkins's account religious faith and political belief appear to operate in separate realms.[4] Finally, the authors devote a full chapter to the nature of slavery in Kentucky, drawing most of their conclusions from Marion B. Lucas's fine monograph *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (1992). However, the chapter closes weakly by answering with conjecture the unhelpful question of whether the institution was somehow more "humane" in the Bluegrass State (p. 256).

Still, *Kentucky Rising* does not lack virtues. Readers will find few better introductions to the political contests that divided the state in the antebellum era and the authors' account of the Civil War in Kentucky–comprising the book's last three chapters–offers a concise overview of the military battles in the state and slaveholding Unionists' growing disenchantment with Lincoln after the Emancipation Proclamation. But for all its

strengths, this book represents a missed opportunity to place the history of antebellum Kentucky and the Ohio Valley where it rightly belongs–that is, at the center of a variety of ongoing historiographical conversations. For too long, Kentucky has stood outside the main currents of scholarly debate, too southern in its cultural orientation to be included in accounts of the northern states and too northern in its political economy to be included in accounts of the South. And the state's historians have–with some notable exceptions–paid too little attention to broader historiographical trends and thus disregarded how political, economic, cultural, and intellectual developments within the state paralleled, were shaped by, and in turn shaped those in the nation. As a result, histories of the antebellum era rarely recognize the significance of Kentucky and the Ohio Valley in the antebellum era (and beyond), and the state's historians have treated Kentucky history as "exceptional," as historian Craig Thompson Friend recently noted.[5] Moncure D. Conway's 1862 observation that Lincoln "would *like to* have God on his side," but "he *must* have Kentucky" reveals the state's high profile in the nineteenth century.[6] When Kentucky historians begin to situate their narratives within the wider historiography of the antebellum era, they will begin to recapture Kentucky and the Ohio Valley's nineteenth-century significance. In the meantime, readers of *Kentucky Rising* will learn much about the state's antebellum history. Equally important, they will discover how much remains undone, how many opportunities exist for telling a richer and fuller history of the state and region. Kentucky's historians still have a lot of work to do.

Notes

[1]. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (1835, 1840; New York: Vintage, 1945), 1:376-380, quotation on 377.

[2]. For a sampling of this new economic history of the antebellum South, see Jonathan Daniel Wells, *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Tom Downey, *Planting a Capitalist South: Planters, Merchants, and Manufacturers in the Southern Interior, 1790-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2006); L. Diane Barnes, *Artisan Workers in the Upper South: Petersburg, Virginia, 1820-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008); Frank Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004); Brian Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton, Federal Politics, and the Global Origins of the Civil War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003). Appearing the same year as *Kentucky Rising*, see also L. Diane Barnes, Brian Schoen, and Frank Towers, eds., *The Old South's Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Together, these works offer a corrective to Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's seminal volumes on the political economy of the antebellum South, including Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Pantheon, 1965); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), esp. 37-99; and Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *The Fruits of Merchant Capitalism: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[3]. In *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 192-195, Bertram Wyatt-Brown used Breckinridge County, located southwest of Louisville along the Ohio River, to demonstrate the South's antipathy to education. He noted that 100 out of 279 registered wills "were signed only with a cross" between 1800 and 1860, while "another 15 to 20 percent in Breckinridge and elsewhere were only marginally literate" (p. 194). For two recent but opposing views of antebellum America, which nonetheless agree on the abiding optimism of white Americans in the early national and antebellum eras, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: From Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005). For an award-winning regional study–with a title similar to that of the book under review–that identifies "improvement" as a central component of the political culture of the early national and antebellum era, see John L. Brooks, *Columbia Rising: Civil Life on the Upper Hudson from the Revolution to the Age of Jackson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Ramage and Watkins cite only Howe's study.

[4]. Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), esp. 150-180; and Howe, *What God Hath Wrought*, 268-270, 573. Southern–or more accurately Virginia–antebellum religious history has enjoyed a flurry of ex-

cellent work in the last few years. For a sampling, see Charles Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Jewel L. Spangler, *Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of the Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008); Randolph Ferguson Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia: Baptist Community and Conflict* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008); and Monica Najar, *Evangelizing the South: A Social History of Church and State in Early Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Other works that explore the link between slavery and religion in the antebellum South include John Patrick Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002); and Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). The best older study of Kentucky slavery, J. Winston Coleman's *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), stressed the comparative mildness of the institution in the state.

[5]. Craig Thompson Friend, "'Heaven Is a Kentucky of a Place': Exceptionalism in the Historiography of Early Kentucky," *Ohio Valley History* 12 (Summer 2012): 77-84.

[6]. The quotation about Kentucky's Civil War significance is widely attributed (without citation) to Abraham Lincoln, but it appeared in Moncure D. Conway, *The Golden Hour* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1862), 119.

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