

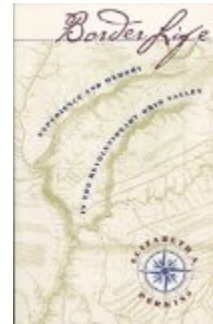
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Elizabeth A. Perkins. *Border Life: Experience and Memory in the Revolutionary Ohio Valley*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xiv + 253 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-2400-9.

Reviewed by William T. Kerrigan (Department of History, Muskingum College, New Concord, Ohio)

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The study of the Trans-Appalachian West has received renewed attention from historians in recent years. Books like John Mack Faragher's *Daniel Boone* (1992) and Stephen Aron's *How the West was Lost* (1996) have forced us to rethink the traditional Turnerian narrative long employed to explain the conquest of the Ohio Valley. In *Border Life: Experience and Memory in the Revolutionary Ohio Valley*, Elizabeth Perkins shares with these recent authors a desire to upend the "triumphal and patriotic narratives" that have too long served as the dominant history of the Ohio Valley. Perkins, however, is not only suspicious of the traditional Turnerian narrative, but of all narratives, and concludes that she has "learned to be wary of simple stories and the imperatives of narrative convention (p. 175)." In this study, she promises to overcome the problem by studying the region "through the eyes of common settlers as they reflected upon their own experiences (p. 2)." This first generation of white settlers, she concludes, did not understand their experiences as part of a grand, historical process with a predetermined outcome, but understood their experiences in more complex ways.

Perkins' window into the perspectives of these early settlers is a collection of over three hundred oral histories transcribed by Presbyterian minister John Dabney Shane in the 1840s. Perkins draws on a much broader range of primary and secondary sources in her efforts to make sense of these simple memoirs, but they serve as the centerpiece of her study. Chapter One provides important background information on Shane and the manuscripts. Succeeding chapters focus on how early settlers understood their environment, issues of identity, "micro-politics," and the construction of memory.

Border Life is thick with interpretation, but stingy in sharing these oral histories directly with the reader. An appendix offers us one transcribed narrative, a fascinating document which left this reader wishing that more might have been provided. While Perkins offers some interesting and original insights, the heavy use of post-modern jargon only rarely leads us to a deeper meaning to the settlers' simple stories. In Chapter Two, we learn that the Ohio River "formed the basic map of cognitive orientation" for early settlers (p. 46). Crevecoeur's descriptions of orchards and farm fields in the Ohio Valley become a "vision of an endlessly replicating European spatial order (p. 42-3)." By retelling a story about a white mother who went crazy after Indians killed her child, Perkins informs us, settlers sought to frighten women into staying close to home, and thus they served to reinforce "the received structures of patriarchal authority (p. 69)." The conclusion of this chapter, that "migrants often employed a distinctive spatial metaphor-the concept of "in and out"-to encompass their basic arrangement of social space (p. 78) seems hardly enlightening.

Chapter Three, entitled "Distinctions and Partitions Amongst Us," offers the most valuable insights. Here, Perkins seeks to explain how early settlers "sorted themselves out." In other words, in encountering others, what kinds of differences had the greatest meaning for these settlers? By examining the ways in which diet, dress, custom and language served as important sources of distinction in early Ohio, between the tidewater Virginian "tuckahoe" and the Blue Ridge "cohee" for example, Perkins makes a persuasive case that our modern "categories of race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status . . . did not necessarily possess the same explanatory

power” for early Ohio Valley settlers (p. 83). Other distinctions, that have since become less visible to us, were often quite meaningful to these early settlers.

Chapter Four, “Politics of Power,” is also well-constructed, and argues convincingly that the frontier experience did in some ways contribute to the rise of democratic ideas. Perkins takes care to distinguish between the democratic developments in “informal politics” and the often countervailing tendencies going on in the formal politics involved in constitution-making and land policy. Making use of the recollections of Shane’s informants, Perkins is able to offer some unique and interesting examples to support this view.

While *Border Life* will reward the careful reader with some new perspectives on the early years of white settlement in the Ohio Valley, it ultimately fails to live up to

its claim to give “vernacular interpretations of the past” their due (p. 176). Perkins’ own interpretation might challenge traditional historical narratives of this period, but it owes far more to the works of modern social scientists and post-modern theorists than to the stories shared by Shane’s subjects. Perkins’ contention that “historians can go a long way toward bridging the contemporary chasm between popularly and scholarly views of the past (p. 175),” seems hollow when one considers the general inaccessibility of this work to non-professional scholars. That chasm is very real. But books like *Border Life* only speak to professional historians, and thus do not begin to address that issue.

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