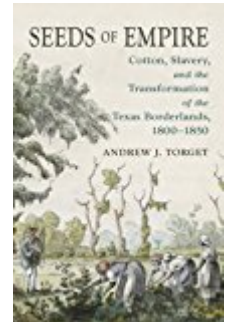


Andrew J. Torget. *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 368 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-2424-2.



Reviewed by Michael Dickinson

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Commissioned by Richard M. Mares (Michigan State University)

Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850 examines the complex evolution of Texas from territory to nation and from nation to American state. The investigation seeks to expand traditional narratives, which often view the annexation of Texas as merely the inevitable result of Manifest Destiny. Historian Andrew Torget views this perspective as problematic and Anglo-centric. Instead Torget envisions the history of Texas borderlands as multifaceted and multicultural, embodying the actions of Mexicans, Indians, Americans, Europeans, and enslaved blacks. The author argues that cotton, slavery, and empire were pivotal in shaping the lives of these populations and critical in the transformation of Texas in the nineteenth century.

The book first places the reader in the disaster-riddled territory of Texas in the early decades of the eighteenth century. Although the region was part of the Spanish Empire as the northeastern extension of New Spain, Texas was largely a fledg-

ling outpost with little security and a sparse population, as Torget highlights. Those who lived in the region, ethnic Mexicans known as Texanos, often found themselves confronting starvation, natural disasters, and attacks by native tribes. Indigenous populations including the Comanches, the Apaches, and the Wichitas frequently raided these lands, stealing horses and other property to trade with Americans further north. The perilous conditions of the Texanos further deteriorated after Mexico gained independence in 1821, since the new nation lacked the resources to adequately aid its northeastern border. One of the author's central strengths is conveying the plight of Texanos early in the text. Through a thoughtful blend of contextualization and historical narrative, Torget is able to paint a picture of Texano desperation and the resulting appeal for American immigration that would trigger Texano marginalization decades later.

Driving the push for American migration to Texas were settlers from the United States, most notably

Stephen Austin. The author convincingly argues that Texano support was crucial in securing permission from the Mexican government for American settlement. Mexican settlers in the region believed importing people to cultivate the land would provide greater protection from indigenous tribes and develop the territory with necessary infrastructure and economic productivity. At a time when cotton quickly emerged as a cash crop and land in the United States became costly, Austin and other Americans viewed Texas as a lucrative addition to the growing US cotton frontier. The rich, fertile soils of Texas seemed to provide the answer to American desires for wealth and material success. But slavery was a crucial factor which became an obstacle to American migration. The institution also caused major complications in the relationship between the region and the Mexican government. Cotton farmers in the United States were heavily reliant upon enslaved labor, so Americans considering settlement in Texas desired to bring captives to harvest cotton fortunes. However, most Mexicans were opposed to the institution since the country did not rely heavily upon enslaved labor, bondage conflicted with revolutionary principles, and the antislavery British were the primary economic allies of the new nation.

Torget argues that the tensions between cotton and slavery in Texas reached a breaking point after years of ideological conflict, culminating in Texas independence. The book then traces the rise and fall of the short-lived republic built on enslaved black labor. Anglos and Texanos hoped their new nation could leverage the potential wealth of cotton to create economic and political stability both domestically and internationally. But as the author underscores, the institution of slavery was a problematic liability given abolitionist efforts in the United States and Great Britain. After a complex series of economic and diplomatic failures, Texas was able to secure annexation by the United States, which feared po-

tential British influence over the territory. The investigation concludes with the US-Mexican War, in which the United States sent troops beyond the Texas southern border as a pretext to bait Mexican aggression. This then allowed the United States to achieve its ultimate goal of securing the territory spanning Texas and California. The author views these developments as crucial in understanding the coming of the Civil War, since the entrance of the new states into the Union exacerbated tensions between pro-slavery and antislavery advocates within the United States. The epilogue ends with a brief connection between the Republic of Texas and the Confederacy. Torget reveals the similarities between the two republics, both wholly committed to slavery and heavily reliant upon cotton. The author then speculates that the Confederacy would have suffered a similar fate as the Republic of Texas because the Confederacy was also built upon similar weaknesses. This is a fascinating comparison, which certainly warrants further attention from historians.

Throughout the text, the author does a commendable job establishing and defending his arguments. Torget utilizes a mixture of settler records, newspaper articles, legal statutes, and other complementary sources to discuss the evolution of Texas borderlands. The greatest strength of the book is the ability to explain the numerous complexities of Texas history in a cogent and nuanced manner. The author is less successful in achieving his larger aim of envisioning the multifaceted nature of Texas development. This was a difficulty more pervasive as the book progressed as the viewpoints of indigenous tribes became less present. Absent almost entirely from the text are black perspectives, enslaved and free, which is a curious oversight given its emphasis on slavery. Were captives fleeing from the Republic of Texas into Mexico? How did bondspeople in Texas perceive of the precarious position of the borderland? How were free black abolitionists responding to developments in Texas at the national Col-

ored Conventions held throughout the century or within the pages of periodicals, for instance? Further work is needed to form a richer and more diverse portrait of the region throughout time and space.

Nevertheless, the text is a significant addition to scholarship dedicated to the history of borderlands. Following in the legacy of historian Frederick Jackson Turner, this book joins the recent work of scholars such as Juliana Barr, Samuel Truett, and Kelly Lytle Hernandez to draw analytical attention to geographic boundaries and spatial fringes. Overall, the author expertly supports thoughtful arguments and deeply expands our understanding of the intersection between cotton, slavery, and empire.

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