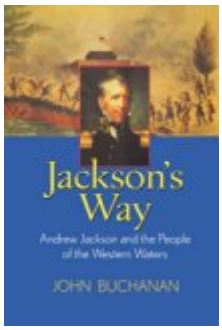
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Buchanan. *Jackson's Way: Andrew Jackson and the People of the Western Waters.* New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001. xiii + 434 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-471-28253-2.



Reviewed by Fred S. Rolater

Published on H-Tennessee (February, 2003)

The Violent Frontier

John Buchanan was formerly an archivist at Cornell University and then the Chief Registrar of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He is the author of *The Road to Guilford Courthouse*, although not a professional historian. All of that is very important in understanding this book, which has some very strong points and some glaring difficulties for the modern reader.

Jackson's Way begins with a brief introduction to the English colonization of the Carolinas and Georgia and to the three-way racial mix there of Europeans, Africans, and Indians. Then attention turns quickly to the birth and early life of Andrew Jackson. Perhaps the most innovative part of the book follows with its emphasis on the vast "folk movement" that carried the Scotch-Irish and their German, Welsh, and French supporters over the enormous territory where the rivers ran west from the mountains. They were the "People of the Western Waters," to use Buchanan's term. The settlement of the Cumberland Country is particularly emphasized since Jackson would make his greatest impact there. The difficult struggle during the early years for survival on the Cumberland in the face of almost constant Indian pressure, from both the Chickasaws and the Chickamaugas, is clearly delineated.

The heart of the book concerns the rise of Andrew Jackson to power. It is a familiar story to those acquainted with early Tennessee history, but it is told very well. Buchanan is a particularly good writer when he deals with violence, and he will always pick the bloodiest possible situations for emphasis. He loves violence and it is obvious that he thinks it is extremely important to his story. Whether it is the Battle of the Bluffs, Buchanan's Station, or Nickajack among many others, it is the story of war that draws his attention. Unless you enjoy violence pictured in great detail, this book will be hard to read.

Finally, the book turns to its climax, the Creek War and the New Orleans campaign. Jackson's march to and from Natchez, that earned him the nickname "Old Hickory", is well recounted. Buchanan is right when he asserts that it during this period that Jackson overcame the difficulties of the Charles Dickinson duel, that almost ended

his political and military career. However, the best part of the book is the coverage of the Creek War. Buchanan works through every possible source, and here he benefits greatly from more recent writers, such as Benjamin Griffith, Frank Owsley, Jr., and Robert S. Quimby, as well as Tom Kanon's excellent article.[1] He also depends extensively on the work of George Stiggins, who was himself half-Red Stick Creek and half-white. Buchanan proves supreme in correlating the Cherokee Indian unit operations with Jackson's Tennessee units. The coverage of the battle of Tohopetra, Horseshoe Bend, is also very well done. Buchanan gives the credit of the original breaking of the Red Stick Creek defense to Jackson's Cherokees and White Stick Creeks, but then turns his attention almost entirely to the Tennessee units and their actions.

The final section of the book deals with Jackson's actions from Tohopetra to New Orleans. It is workman-like but not as creative as the earlier chapters. His coverage of the Battle of New Orleans seems to lack the military understanding that Buchanan demonstrates earlier in the book. The final chapter concludes with a short mention of the Adam-Onis treaty. Buchanan concludes that the war between 1813 and 1815 removed two great enemies, the Creeks and the British, to the overwhelming folk movement of western Europeans into the Old Southwest. By eliminating the Spanish as well, the Adams-Onis treaty cleared the final obstacle for that movement's success.

Buchanan's single-minded focus on the Scotch-Irish is troubling. His hero is Andrew Jackson, but he is only slightly less enamored with any Scotch-Irish frontiersman of the Old Southwest, whether their name is Blount, Buchanan, Donelson, Robertson, or even Alexander McGillivray, who was half-Creek Indian and half-Scotch-Irish. It is obvious, though never specifically mentioned, that Buchanan is also of Scotch Irish background. This book is an exercise in filial pietism that has rarely been seen a serious historical publication in the past hundred years. The whole tenor of the book will remind a modern scholar of the works of Theodore Roosevelt on the same frontier country. You certainly can hear the echo of John Reid and John Henry Eaton's ***The Life of Andrew Jackson*** (1817), which is a major source for this book. For a serious student of Tennessee history, this is one of the most significant problems in the book.

This reviewer finds three further problems. The first is probably not a valid criticism, since we should always review the book as it is written. But it seems to me that the actual final conquest by the Europeans of the Old Southwest came with Indian Removal and not in 1815. If that is Buchanan's theme, it needed better coverage. He also could have discussed the intriguing conflict between the Scotch-Irish Andrew Jackson and the seven-eights Scotch Irish, one-eighth Cherokee John Ross. The third is a more serious problem. Buchanan does not like American Indians. In fact, like his frontier heroes, he hates them. There can never be a good Indian except one who is partly European, especially Scotch-Irish.

On the other hand, this book has some extremely strong points. The first strength can be seen in the preface. Buchanan emphasizes that the struggle for control of the Old Southwest--which he defines as centered in Tennessee with strong incursions into Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and the Florida Panhandle--was an "epic." It had "savagery and loss of life, plot and counterplot, larger-than-life players, and an outcome that remained for contemporaries unpredictable almost to the end." Buchanan likes military terms, and he sees that struggle for conquest as "a war," whereas the later trans-Mississippi conquest was "a mopping-up operation" (pp. ix-x). Buchanan is quite correct that the conquest of the Old Southwest and particularly of Tennessee was a fifty-year struggle of epic proportions that has been somewhat lost in our modern movie and TV emphasis on the Trans-Mississippi West. This reviewer would hasten to point out, however, that it was

hardly a mopping-up operation over most of its 350-year period.

Buchanan's second strength is a direct outgrowth of his training as an archivist. He is an excellent researcher. He has consulted almost every possible early source for Tennessee history between Jackson's birth and the Battle of New Orleans. Furthermore, he has listed thirty-seven books published in the 1990s. He certainly cannot be faulted for effort. This is far better than almost anyone else except Robert Remini in the last few decades in writing about early Tennessee history. Perhaps this is best illustrated in Buchanan's handling of the marriage between Andrew and Rachel Donelson Robards Jackson. Carefully screening every possible record, Buchanan reaches a conclusion that was common in their day but virtually unheard of today. He says they went together to Natchez in January 1790 and began a "marriage" by the summer, long before the Virginia enabling act for the divorce between Lewis and Rachel Robards on December 20, 1790. Further, Buchanan asserts that there is absolutely no record of a marriage ceremony in Natchez (pp. 110-111, 117-119). Thus, Buchanan basically agrees with Jackson's opponents that the marriage was illegal and that they were guilty of adultery. But then Buchanan ends with the assessment, "Rachel was married to a despicable character who later showed signs of mental instability. He made her life a living hell. ... What was she supposed to do, enter a nunnery? No, Rachel and Jackson were young, in love, and did what came naturally" (p. 119). Though agreeing that Jackson and Rachel violated the law, Buchanan excuses them since Jackson can do no wrong as far as he is concerned.

How can we summarize this book? First, every Tennessee library needs a copy. It has much information that is not available except in older books. Second, Buchanan correctly sees the intense nature of the struggle for control of the Old Southwest between two races. Third, this is a work of great devotion to the Scotch Irish. They are the heroes; Native Americans are the villains. Like any good movie or well-written book, there is great drama here. But any Tennessee history teacher must warn his or her students about the bias here. Finally, if you are both a Tennessee historian and a historian of the American Indian like this reviewer, this will be a very hard book to read.

Note

[1]. Tom Kanon, " 'A Slow, Laborious Slaughter': The Battle of Horseshoe Bend," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 58 (1999): 2-15.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://www.h-net.org/~tenn/

Citation: Fred S. Rolater. Review of Buchanan, John. *Jackson's Way: Andrew Jackson and the People of the Western Waters.* H-Tennessee, H-Net Reviews. February, 2003.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7220