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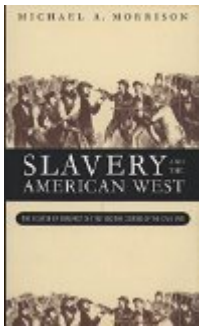

Michael A. Morrison. *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xii + 396 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2319-4.

Reviewed by Allan G. Bogue

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After noting many of the major efforts to explain the coming of our greatest national conflict, Michael A. Morrison explains that this book "examines the relationship between the territorial issue and the origins of the American Civil War." Combining "political, diplomatic, and intellectual history, it explores the origin, force, and effect of expansion and western settlement on national politics in the 1840s and 1850s." Setting aside "party structures or political maneuvers," it is "a narrative of political affairs" designed "to illuminate and analyze the principled conflicts over slavery extension" (p. 4). In 1844, Whigs and Democrats, Morrison explains, thought of the Texas issue largely in economic terms, and the division between the parties was nationwide; by 1860, the major political divisions were sectional, and the national political system was fragmented.

There are, writes Morrison, a number of major themes in the book. He seeks first of all to "root expansion and western settlement within the context of Jacksonian politics." Secondly, he has tried "to explain how specifically the territorial issue contributed to the fragmentation and sectionalization of the two party system." A third major theme traces the transformation by which the "inherited revolutionary political heritage" was also sectionalized (pp. 5-7).

Morrison rejects or modifies various influential earlier interpretations of the events of the years 1830-1860. There was, he maintains, no conscious conspiracy in either North or South to deny participation in the federal government to the other. Nor did he find consistency in the arguments of either southerners or northerners. Unique sectional cultures did not exist. Nor can slavery be considered the cause of the Civil War in any narrow sense. In Morrison's estimation, the various economic interpretations of the Progressive historians inadequately explain the antebellum years. In terms of economic development, the sections were more similar than Progressives admitted, and slavery would have been considered less important than the conflict between capital and democracy had economic interest ruled. Finally, in this respect, writes Morrison, "the conflict over the territories suggests the animating effect of principles and ideology. That is, inherited revo-

lutionary values were axiomatic and controlling." As for ethnocultural conflict and its impact upon the politics of the 1850s, it was "the dog that failed to bark in the night" (p. 10).

Morrison explains that he has used traditional methods in the preparation of this book, pursuing multiarchival manuscript research and closely reading "a wide array of official, printed primary, and periodical sources." He has sought to recreate "the mental world of the actors and the intellectual context" of viewpoints "by assessing the meaning and importance of these events from the moment of their occurrence." Here, he tries "to present the public and private discourse of antebellum Americans as it bore meaning in their minds." In developing argument and explanation, Morrison quotes the actors of the time freely as they evaluate and critique slavery, popular sovereignty, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the constituent elements of republicanism. His general purpose, Morrison writes, has been "to explore and assess the ideological nature of these familiar issues in a manner calculated to give a fuller and more complete understanding of the real essence of the sectional conflict" (pp. 10, 12).

In each of the various chapters of this book, Morrison has briefly sketched a major aspect of western expansion during the antebellum years in its congressional and national settings and provided the justifications offered by policy advocates within the political parties and the counter arguments of opponents. These Morrison places within the broader context of party ideology and America's revolutionary and republican heritage.

Morrison's impressive bibliography of primary and secondary sources attests to wide ranging and intensive research. He takes the commendable position that the period should be viewed as one that was developing on its own terms rather than as an inevitable progression toward civil war. He reveals an exceptional talent for selecting revealing incidents and apt quotations and linking arguments to their ideological roots. He is a perceptive analyst, noting the inherent but growing tensions between the twin revolutionary legacies of liberty and equality as party spokesmen sought to use the revolutionary principles and precedents in solving the problems of the era and as the flow of events increasingly placed the ideologies of the Whig and Democratic parties under stress and contributed to the strengthening of sectional sentiment. One of the great merits of the book lies in the fact that Morrison keeps the individual in the forefront of the narrative rather than allowing faceless ideologies to take over. In sum, ***Slavery and the American West*** is a very well written and sophisticated analysis of the steps by which Americans transformed the ideology of republicanism from one that accommodated the needs of two national political parties in the Jackson years to variant readings of the place and justification of slavery endorsed by the residents of sections that were prepared to carry their differences to the point of war, each convinced that the other was infringing the principles of liberty and equality proclaimed at the beginning of the republic.

From the vast clutter of the recorded past, the historian selects themes that provide sufficient importance and coherence to justify a book length study. There is no question that we should be grateful for the result in this case. It is a splendid study. The H-List reviews, however, are written in the hope that they will provoke some useful interchange of views, and with this in mind, I conjured up I.M. Skeptic, an aged historian, battered by years of trying to survive in a world of new histories, and asked his opinion of the argument in this book.

After some effort to pull his thoughts together, Skeptic said: Is it appropriate to dismiss other lines of explanation as cavalierly as Morrison does in his introduction? And can he be sure that those nice quotes reflect the views of anyone other than the individuals quoted? Granted we know that the big names, Clay and Calhoun for example,

had followings of many individuals willing to accept their views, but what about the political rankers and the obscure correspondents of politicians or newspapers cited here? Did they speak for others, or did they achieve fame in this book simply because what they said had a nice ring to it? When Morrison speaks of moderate Democrats or barn burners, how many individuals is he talking about?

When Morrison uses the verb "animate," does he mean cause? Presumably he does and, if so, should there not be some facing up to the problems that causation presents the historian? The inference in this book seems to be that individuals acted in response to the republican principles that they advanced in justification of their action or position. Those who read the correspondence of Charles Sumner will find, if it has not been stolen, a letter, bearing the senator's signature, in which he informed Francis Lieber that he had succeeded in advancing a pet measure. Now he wrote to request that Lieber provide him with some constitutional justifications. There are some certainly who prefer to consider the argument back to constitutional principle or theory not necessarily as cause but rather as a means of justifying or legitimizing actions or policies taken on the basis of rational self interest. Granted, of course, others might then support policies on the basis of such argument. But do we today accept at face value the rationalizations of our political representatives? Why then should we accept those emanating from the politicians of one hundred and fifty years ago?

Is it possible that basically the great conflict was rooted simply in differences over development of the western country, over who was to control that development, over the economic, political and moral environment that was to prevail there, and over the means by which that development was to be effected? That could be the case, and Morrison's study would still be an important analysis of the creation and use of political rhetoric. That rhetoric, however, would not stand as THE animating factor in the coming of the great conflict. If considered in that sense, the tail may be wagging the dog rather vigorously here.

At this point old Skeptic toddled off to the library, still living perhaps in the days before Bernard Bailyn dissected the ideological origins of the American Revolution.

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