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West Virginia’s founding during the Civil War appears straightforward. West(ern) Virginians, frustrated by decades-long intrastate grievances rooted in political and economic inequalities, sided with the Union while eastern Virginians joined the Confederacy. Virginia’s internal disunion and civil war reflected the larger national narrative, as a younger, politically democratic, and free labor-oriented region rejected an archaic planter-centered political economy. The Mountain State’s creation coincided with slavery’s destruction, a welcome development for mountaineers long opposed to human bondage. In short, West Virginia’s entry into the Union in 1863 reflected the triumph of democracy over aristocracy and free labor over enslaved labor.

In *The Fifth Border State: Slavery, Emancipation, and the Formation of West Virginia, 1829–1872*, Scott A. MacKenzie challenges this narrative and provides a compelling alternative interpretation of West Virginia’s creation. Rather than opposing slavery or slaveholders, antebellum West(ern) Virginians accepted human bondage as a central institution that strengthened political and civil rights for white residents, provided important labor for the region, and reinforced social and racial hierarchy. When the Union dissolved in spring 1861, West(ern) Virginians refused to rush headlong into the statehood movement, preferring a more conservative path that protected slavery and preserved residents’ connection to the state. Residents’ proximity along the border between the Union and Confederacy, however, quickly exposed them to similar wartime exigencies experienced by residents in the border states of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware. Indeed, MacKenzie argues, West(ern) Virginia represented a fifth border state, displaying a “commitment to white supremacy and enslavement” common throughout the other four border states (p. 6). Ultimately, residents’ commitment to protecting racial hierarchy led them to embrace statehood. West Virginia’s Reconstruction experience reflected the continued divisiveness of its status as a border state as Union and Confederate veterans and their families fought over the meaning of the war, emancip-
ation, and the role of Black West Virginians in a postslavery state.

MacKenzie's interpretation rests on a broad array of primary sources, including newspapers, census data, slave schedules, private correspondence, legislation, and other printed primary sources that reveal West(ern) Virginians' commitment to slavery and the state. Indeed, MacKenzie labels the antebellum years an era of “reconciliation, not division,” dismissing previous historians who argued that inadequate internal improvements, delayed constitutional reforms, geographical isolation, and disputes concerning slavery deepened intrastate sectionalism (p. 10). West(ern) Virginians regularly elected slaveholders to local and state offices, displayed similar voting patterns as other Virginians, and engaged in the same “politics of slavery” that characterized southern political campaigns. Virginians resolved the most divisive and lingering political issue, suffrage, with a new, democratic constitution ratified in 1851. The new constitution provided for white manhood suffrage while increasing the number of popularly elected positions in the state, notably the governor and lieutenant governor. (The new constitution also provided a tax break for enslavers, an important provision that MacKenzie glosses over.) Still, while previous historians have viewed the proceeding decade as one of increasing division between western and eastern Virgin-ia, MacKenzie observes an era of unity. By 1860, Virginians experienced a period of intrastate political stability and harmony, with West(ern) Virginia a “heavily proslavery and Democratic region” similar to other regions in the state (p. 60). Meanwhile, the nascent Republican Party struggled to attract supporters and remained “a tiny and wildly unpopular minority party” in the region (p. 60).

Virginia’s secession from the United States challenged that stability. Many West(ern) Virginians regarded secession as an existential threat to slavery and, consequently, undertook actions to protect the institution. Few leaders or residents openly advocated for statehood following Virginians' approval of the Ordinance of Secession in May 1861, choosing instead to reorganize the state government and seek protection from the federal government. By fall 1861, as West(ern) Virginians contemplated statehood, the issue of slavery remained unresolved, with some leaders wanting to avoid the topic completely and others hoping for a frank conversation about the institution’s future. Ultimately, delegates in the First and Second Wheeling Conventions approached statehood by emphasizing its “conservative promises,” notably restoring order and protecting property (p. 101). This “conservative phase of the statehood movement” produced a “proslavery constitution” that excluded slaves and free Blacks from entering the new state (pp. 92, 93).

The war’s progression, however, forced West(ern) Virginians to reconsider the statehood movement and the proposed constitution. By 1862, West(ern) Virginians, beset by guerillas and slavery’s erosion, advocated for a more “radical phase” of the statehood movement (p. 117). This understanding of the statehood movement unfolding in a “two-stage process” represents one of MacKenzie’s most important contributions (p. 146). The continued presence of slaves self-eman-cipating convinced leaders and residents that the war had mortally wounded the institution, while guerilla conflict converted formerly cautious residents into advocates for statehood and emancipation. President Lincoln and his administration welcomed West Virginia’s entry into the Union, but preferred that voters in the proposed state support emancipation rather than be accused of federal imposition. West(ern) Virginians approved a gradual emancipation measure, known as the Willey Amendment, as a means of securing statehood and “satiating Republicans' need for a border state to enact their emancipation policy” (p. 127). West Virginia emerged as an example for other border states to follow regarding emancipa-
tion, as Maryland and Missouri followed suit in 1863 and 1864, respectively.

Statehood politics and the meaning of emancipation, however, proved disruptive throughout Reconstruction. Republicans splintered over Black suffrage, while Democrats, conservative whites, and disenfranchised Confederates effectively used race to undercut Republican policies and campaigns. Former Confederates, “unable to vote, teach, practice law, or sue” existed “one step above the previously enslaved,” a punishment many white West Virginians considered draconian and a threat to white supremacy (p. 159). Voters’ approval of the Flick Amendment in 1871 re-enfranchised Confederate veterans, further dividing Republicans and unifying Democrats. Once in power, Democrats and their allies supported the 1872 Constitution, which “purged the radical regime that formed the state” and punished radicals for their “wartime embrace of emancipation” (pp. 184, 185). Much like the other border states, the politics of emancipation lingered throughout West Virginia’s Reconstruction era, reigniting debates about loyalty during the Civil War and the place of Black Americans in a postslavery nation.

MacKenzie provides an important historiographical contribution and correction to West Virginia’s founding. The author’s deep research and close reading of the sources reveals the region’s commitment to slavery and how the war’s progression shaped political leaders’ and residents’ attitudes concerning slavery and emancipation. The study’s tight political focus, however, overlooks demographic changes unfolding in the region, specifically how immigration patterns after 1848 shaped understandings about labor and loyalty to the state and its institutions. While Republicans remained political outliers for much of the antebellum period, their recruitment of German immigrants ushered in an important era of politics and labor that would continue to shape the new state. Further, much of the social and cultural context remains absent, notably during debates concerning emancipation where much of the study remains tightly focused on political speeches and debates. The top-down, political focus of the study illuminates much of the important debate among West Virginia’s leaders and founders but omits much of the context in which those debates occurred. Still, MacKenzie’s impressive work reveals the dynamics of race and slavery, emancipation and freedom, memory and revisionism in another border state during the Civil War era.
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