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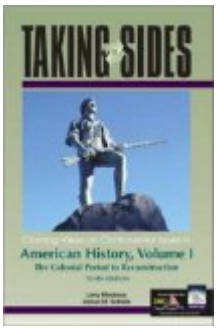

Larry Madaras, James M. SoRelle. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, vol. 1: The Colonial Period to Reconstruction.* Guilford: McGraw-Hill, 2003. xv + 399 pp. $24.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-07-285029-1.

Reviewed by T. Stephen Whitman

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This book has two cardinal virtues. First, its structure asserts that history turns on asking questions about the past. Second, the answers are supplied by good historians advancing an interpretation. The editors pose seventeen controversies about America before the twentieth century, grouped chronologically in colonial, revolutionary, antebellum, and civil-war eras. For each controversy, students read edited versions of historians' articles, e.g., William McLoughlin and Jon Butler on the pros and cons of the Great Awakening as a cause or pre-condition of the American Revolution, or James McPherson and Vincent Harding on "who freed the slaves?" The editors provide a brief introduction to each issue that summarizes the essayists' positions. They also offer a postscript that points to other interpretations of the issue in debate and suggests further reading.

Thematically, the book gives considerable attention to women, Indians, and African Americans as actors in history. The antebellum section, for example, includes Sandra Myres and John Mack Faragher on whether westward migration changed women's roles in the nineteenth century, as well as a discussion of slavery's impact on the black family, featuring Stanley Elkins and Eugene Genovese.

So far, so good. It would be intriguing to see a textbook that used primary sources to present the controversies, such as pairing James Henry Hammond and William Lloyd Garrison on slavery, or Alexander Hamilton and Melancthon Smith on ratifying the Constitution, but that is not what Professors Madaras and SoRelle set out to do. Let us grant the editors their impulse of wanting to bring history alive through debates by noted historians on interpretive issues. We can try to assess the essays offered with three questions in mind. First, does the list of controversial questions capture the most important historical issues? Second, are the editors selecting good, current historiography on these issues? Third, how well do the editors guide us in contextualing the issues and in suggesting additional reading, in their introductions and postscripts?

On the first question, I would give Madaras and SoRelle generally high marks. Asking if

Columbus was an imperialist or if Thomas Jefferson wanted to bring slavery to an end will elicit differing opinions from students and thereby energize classroom discussion. So will the question of whether or not the Mexican War should be regarded as American imperialism. Likewise, a focus on Robert E. Lee's military performance, namely, "Is Lee overrated as a general?" powerfully challenges conventional wisdom.

The question list could perhaps be improved, however. In their efforts to find sharply drawn issues, the editors have shied away from offering essays on the most complex, and necessarily multi-causal, issues. There is nothing here on why the Civil War occurred, for example, nor on why slavery became so important in colonial America. Perhaps these issues could be included within the pro and con format, with a somewhat amplified introduction and postscript to deal with the complexity of the historical debates. If slavery's origins and Civil War causation are, perhaps, too complex to fit into the format, other issues are absent because of the difficulty of framing them in controversial terms.

I would like to see something in a volume like this on the shift from republicanism to democratic politics, and one would think that the work of Gordon Wood, Joyce Appleby, or Lance Banning (and others) could be mined to this end. Alternatively, could not a controversy be framed on the so-called transformation to capitalism, or as Charles Sellers put it, the Market Revolution? What about having students read excerpts of Edmund Morgan (***American Slavery, American Freedom***) and Kathleen Brown (***Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs***) on why slavery came to define the South?

For all their careful attention to issues of gender and race, the authors do miss some opportunities. They also turn a blind eye to questions of political economy, surely a crucial and contested ground in the Early Republic. The topic is obliquely addressed in a pair of essays by John Roche and Alfred Young in "Were the Founding Fathers Democratic Reformers?" but more could be done. To sum up, Madaras and SoRelle have asked teachable questions, but this reviewer longs for a few additions to the list.

Let's move on from the matter of framing questions to the choice of respondents. Have Madaras and SoRelle selected the best historians as witnesses to debate the controversial issues? On some of the pairings, the editors have certainly knocked the ball right out of the park. It is hard to imagine two more different readings of the Salem witch trials than Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum's socioeconomical versus Laurie Winn Carlson's biomedical interpretation. We get two overlapping but different ways of knowing the world, with each writer stating his or her assumptions and biases clearly enough for students to identify them and engage in debate.

On other issues, we get good testimony, but a somewhat contrived controversy. It can hardly be a bad idea for students to read Lois Carr and Lorena Walsh's classic piece "The Planter's Wife" on the lives of colonial women in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake nor Mary Beth Norton's "The Myth of the Golden Age," dealing with a larger space-time continuum. I am far from sure that these historians were "clashing" directly with each other, but these are two fine articles.

If the gentle reader will allow me another sports-derived analogy, one could also ask how often the "fix is in," regarding the selection and presentation of the controversial issues. This is a way of asking what Madaras and SoRelle's interpretive stance(s) is or are on the issues they select. Do we get two champions of their respective sides doing battle, or is the debate tilted by offering up some historical palooka to be slugged to the mat by his superior opponent?

Much turns on one's rooting interest, of course. If you think Kirkpatrick Sale gives us an innovative and incisive look at Christopher Columbus, then pairing Sale with his critic Robert

Royal is lively stuff. If you see Sale as a case of hydrophobia not checked in time, then you might think that Madaras and SoRelle just picked an easy mark so that the "right" interpretation of Columbus would emerge.

More generally, the editors have leaned towards classic formulations of issues that could perhaps be updated. Newer essays could be chosen and certainly the postscripts could point readers towards more contemporary work. Let me illustrate through the topic I am most familiar with, slavery. Stanley Elkins initiated a major debate on the nature of slavery with his analogy of plantation life to the concentration camp as totalizing institutions, and Eugene Genovese supplied a major corrective to Elkins in ***Roll, Jordan, Roll***. The debate has moved well past the positions those scholars carved out in 1959 and 1974, respectively, although I can understand having students read Elkins and Genovese as foundational works. But a suggested readings section on slavery and the family that cites nothing more recent than the mid-1970s work of Fogel and Engerman or Herbert Gutman is seriously deficient.

For the record, about half of the thirty-four essays in the book were written in the 1970s or before, as are a comparable portion of the works recommended for further reading. This means that the new cultural history gets scant attention in this collection, as do more recent interpretive thrusts. One reads much more in this collection about what white people thought about African Americans, for example, than about black agency.

When all is said and done, Madaras and SoRelle still have a worthwhile collection of disputes and historical assessments of those disputes. To put my own doubts about the book in perspective, I would recommend the textbook to a colleague as a teaching tool, if that colleague were sufficiently at home with current historiography in colonial and nineteenth-century American history to augment and update what is on offer here. If teaching the first half of the survey took that colleague out of her or his area of knowledge, I would be less confident, for too often Madaras and SoRelle overlook new work in favor of well written but somewhat stale interpretations. But to close where this review began, asking questions and disputing interpretations is what history is all about, and Madaras and SoRelle get that big issue exactly right.

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