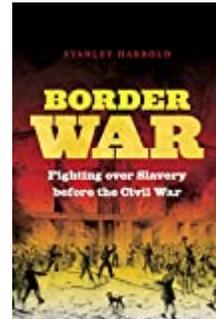




Stanley Harrold. *Border War: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xvi + 292 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3431-2.



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Conflict on the Middle Ground: Sectionalism and Violence in the Border States

Stanley Harrold's excellent treatment of the border states in the prewar years comes at a fortuitous moment for Civil War scholarship, for 2011 marks the sesquicentennial of the war's commencement. Yet, instead of providing a standard narrative about the sectional crisis, Harrold offers a fresh perspective by examining the border states—both North and South—as a distinct region embroiled in sectional conflict well before the official outbreak of the Civil War. The residents of these states often shared economic, political, and cultural values that set them apart from their contemporaries in the Northeast or the Deep South. However, in his telling, violent clashes over slavery were not uncommon on this border, because fundamentally different labor systems made each side prone to sharpening rhetoric, increased radicalization, and acts of violence.

In *Border War*, Harrold emphasizes the centrality of this border's story, detailing how sectional identities, economies, and moralities intermeshed, interacted, and clashed (p. xi). By proving that events in this region profoundly shaped the sectional discord that culminated in

the Civil War, the author advances a new interpretation of this region's significance. Unlike Edward Ayers, who argued that the border states were merely swept up in the Civil War and were on the periphery of radical rhetoric, Harrold insists that the Border South and Lower North were leading actors in the sectional conflict.

Harrold defines the border as nineteenth-century contemporaries did, encompassing Missouri, Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware in what he calls the "Border South," and New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa in what he terms the "Lower North" (p. xi). He describes the borderland more generally as a site where "contrasting economic, political, and cultural forces compete, interact, and clash. They are most volatile when residents on each side of the border may easily pass to the other" (p. 2). Contrary to Michael Holt's assertion that controversies over the peculiar institution had *not* led to violence, this book focuses on the violent clashes that occurred in this region. The border struggle may not have reached the proportion of full-scale, organized warfare, but it was a protracted quarrel

arising from the tension between free and slave societies existing in close quarters.

In general, Harrold adopts a simultaneously thematic and chronological approach that makes several noteworthy contributions to a more nuanced understanding of the sectional crisis. For instance, he effectively demonstrates that slavery was *not* declining in the border slave states, contrary to what some contemporaries (and modern scholars) have claimed. Some states, like Delaware, did register a decrease in their slave population, but other states like Missouri and Kentucky saw significant increases. Furthermore, while racism persisted, free black and white communities in the Lower North worked together to protest Southern raids into their state. For Harrold, this was fundamentally a struggle over safeguarding the needs of the local community.

Border War also provides an extensive treatment of how residents of the Border South and Lower North diverged from their sectional counterparts. For instance, in the 1850s, politicians and journalists in the Lower South emphasized the importance of slavery's expansion, but in the Border South, slaveholders and their allies were most concerned with enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law and ensuring that the federal government did its part to perpetuate slavery. When it comes to secession, Harrold argues that leaders in the Border South were less inclined toward secession because they believed the best way to protect the slave system (and all its attendant privileges for whites) was to rely on federal authority. For many in the Border South, past understandings of the border struggle reinforced their conviction that slavery—the centerpiece of their social, political, and economic systems—would only be protected through federal intervention. The abolitionist presence in the Lower North, at least as it was depicted in the press, was simply too great a threat.

Much of Harrold's discussion of this violence focuses on a detailed analysis of the kidnappings and renditions that returned fugitive slaves to their Southern owners. Both African Americans and their white allies resisted with force, whether it be in isolated instances of self-defense, in organized posses sent to track down slave catchers, or through the courthouse and jail riots where community members mobbed on behalf of their black

brethren. In particular, his extended discussion of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, including its practical implementation and relation to political developments, does much to set the groundwork for the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. His work illustrates how pro-slavery advocates saw the 1850 legislation as a corrective to the weaknesses of previous legislation, which did not effectively bolster slaveholders' attempts to retrieve their slave property.

Another significant contribution to historical literature on the border states comes from Harrold's third chapter, which includes an incisive commentary on slavery in the North. Harrold presents telling examples of slaveholders who brought their slaves northward, including the story of a woman from Maryland who had African American apprentices at her home in Downingtown, Pennsylvania, in what a neighbor called "a most flagrant outrage, not only upon justice and humanity, but upon the spirit of our laws" (p. 65). Stories such as this one challenge historians' traditional perception of slavery as being only a Southern institution, once again illustrating the permeability of the border separating North from South.

There is certainly much to praise in this groundbreaking study, but *Border War* could be expanded to include more analysis centered on the African American perspective. While Harrold notes that "black people were their own first line of defense," he focuses primarily on the perspective of whites, instead of incorporating African American voices more fully into the discourse (p. 101). His self-professed reliance on secondary sources, which is to be expected in a book spanning such a wide geographic area, might provide a partial explanation for why African Americans have not taken center stage in this narrative.

Still, in the final analysis, Harrold's work reshapes our perspective on how the border states played a vital role in the road to Civil War. By framing this story in terms of violence, he cogently explains how "sophisticated national debate over slavery, its territorial expansion, or the relative political power of each section of the U.S. government were not the fundamental causes of conflict in the North-South borderlands" (p. 15).

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