

antebellum period's most notable anti-slavery politicians—including Martin Van Buren; Thomas Morris, who coined the term “slave power”; and David Wilmot, who proposed to Congress that all land obtained from Mexico be free of slavery—possessed Democratic rather than Whig lineages. In drawing attention to such forgotten Free Soilers, Earle has perhaps attributed too much importance to these minority partners in the Republican Party. While this element was present at the creation of the idea of Free Soil and played a key role in Van Buren's ill-fated 1848 presidential bid, it remains less clear how important they were in the mature Republican Party of the 1850s.

Readers with an interest in Indiana history may be frustrated to discover that Earle has concentrated on neither politicians nor counties from the Hoosier state. Nonetheless, these minor quibbles do not diminish the importance of Earle's well-researched, well-written, and well-argued book; one which should be read by anyone interested in antebellum politics, the antislavery movement, or the coming of the Civil War.

JOHN SACHER is chair of the social sciences department at Emporia State University and author of *A Perfect War of Politics: Parties, Politicians, and Democracy in Louisiana, 1824-1861* (2003).



Rough Justice

Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947

By Michael J. Pfeifer

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004. Pp. x, 245. Maps, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.)

In a short and commendable book, Michael J. Pfeifer examines how Americans defined, clashed, and compromised over the nature of criminal justice from the end of Reconstruction to the middle of the twentieth century. Relying mainly on newspaper accounts and coroners' inquests and using the comparative perspective provided by seven quite disparate states (Iowa, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Washington, California, Louisiana, and New York), he argues for a his-

torical connection between lynching and the death penalty.

Revolutionary-era ideals that allowed violence against enemies, growing alongside faith in popular sovereignty, sustained the idea of lynching as a form of justice. Pfeifer offers strong evidence to argue that mobs—or “rough justice” advocates—were not compensating for an “absence of law,” but rather confronting a legal system they considered slow, impersonal, and inefficient.

American lynchers acted against due process, writes Pfeifer, as much as against those who challenged white supremacy, transgressed moral codes, or violated interests of class.

As time passed, capitalism transformed social relations and helped shape the law in a nation in flux. At a time when immigration and westward expansion created new communities, Pfeifer identifies a shift to the side of due process. However, the middle-class proponents of formal criminal justice who believed lynching to be detrimental to law and order could not completely uproot "rough justice." Through the development of "racialized" executions carried out inside four walls, they established standards of respectability, prevented social chaos, and kept intact the "symbolic functions of ritualistic lethal retribution" (p. 123). Though Americans living in the Jim Crow South turned to the death penalty more slowly than did those living in the Northeast, Midwest, and West, they did so with the assurance that the new style of rough justice would sustain, not wreck, the foundations of white supremacy. In an impassioned epilogue, Pfeifer reminds readers that capital punishment cannot be "separated from larger social forces such as racism" because it "carries the profound legacy of lynching" (p. 153). This argument puts to shame federal judges who have argued—and still do—that "the administration of capital punishment can be individualized" (p. 152).

I do agree with Pfeifer that lynching is directly connected to the death penalty, but the relationship is incomplete as long as "dilemmas of social order" (p. 7) are restricted to a list of alleged crimes such as rape, murder, and theft. A broader definition of crime would not only prevent the obliteration of the victim's historical experience and agency—especially in a region where electoral politics provided numerous violation opportunities—it would also improve our understanding of what it meant for white supremacists to fight transgressors without lynching. If a causal link exists between the decline of lynching and the legal and political victories won by the African American foot soldiers during the 1950s and 1960s, historians of "rough justice" should take part more actively in debates on the origins of the civil rights movement. By bringing the reader closer to the second Reconstruction, Pfeifer accomplishes much more in this splendid little book than he intended.

NELSON OUELLET is a professor in the department of history and geography at the Université de Moncton, Canada. He has published articles on the northward migration of African Americans, is completing a manuscript on the history of the civil rights movement, and has research in progress on labor contracts signed in Tennessee during Reconstruction.