Based on his 2011 dissertation, Justin M. Carroll has written an informative business biography of John Askin (1739–1815), an Irish-born British fur merchant who plied his trade in the second half of the eighteenth century at several Great Lakes sites: Michilimackinac/Makinac, Detroit, Grand Portage, Sault Ste. Marie, Albany, and Schenectady.

While challenging the Hudson’s Bay Company and affiliated with future partners in the North West Company, “Paddy” Askin remained a relatively minor merchant during a turbulent, violent era of international warfare in Canada. He was plagued by tyrannical British commandants and demanding New York investors but “weathered the collapse of his trade, bankruptcy, and threats of jail,” while persevering to invest in “depots, ships, warehouses, sawmills, bakeries, blacksmiths, and fur presses”—many of which were “destroyed, confiscated, or repurposed” (p. 146). Such periods of success and failure, collapse and recovery, reveal “the unique possibilities, creative constellations, and tremendous risks the Great Lakes, the British Empire, and the fur trade offered those who participated in that world” (p. 146). A most informative (and enjoyable) sub-theme was Askin’s career-long involvement in distributing various alcoholic beverages, including rum, which colonial traders described as “milk” for “Indian children” (p. 22).

Despite some richly evocative passages, this book has a problem defining its ideal audience: knowledgeable scholars or the general public? Carroll mines most of the relevant details in the two-volume John Askin Papers, edited by Milo Quiafe in 1928–1931, but he is forced to include simplistic accounts of major historical events, such as Pontiac’s War, because Askin lived through them. Serious fur trade experts will find such material superfluous; general readers may not know whether the author is supplying definitive accounts of such events or merely speculative descriptions. Moreover, Askin seems even more minor when his name doesn’t appear for ten consecutive pages (pp. 38–48). Readers’ confidence in the author and the press is also shaken with the repeatedly inconsistent spelling of Jeffery/Jeffrey [Amherst]—sometimes on the same page (p. 157)—and Potawatomi/Pottawatomi
(pp. 16–17) that proofreading did not catch. In addition, the author does not grasp the difference between “further” and “farther” (p. 64).

“In Askin’s life….the close interconnectedness of trade and empire resulted in his greatest and most lasting successes and his most disastrous and enduring failures” (p. xiv). Many of those “lasting successes” involved his two Indigenous wives and several talented multiethnic children, and this reader would have liked much more information on their lives before, and especially after, Askin’s death.

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Frontier Democracy: Constitutional Conventions in the Old Northwest
By Silvana R. Siddali
(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. 392. Illustrations, tables, maps, index. $120.00.)

Many students of history will define the Age of Jackson as one that wrestled with national constitutional questions, but the era also produced a flurry of constitutional activity at the state level. Between 1830 and 1860, twenty-two states either crafted new constitutions as they entered the union or revised existing ones. This interesting moment nestled between the first wave of constitutional activity that ended with the entry of Missouri and Maine into the Union in 1820, and the punctuated bursts of constitutional revisionism, largely among slaveholding states, during the Civil War and Reconstruction eras.

In Frontier Democracy, Silvana Siddali examines state constitutional debates in the Old Northwest (which she defines as Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Wisconsin) as they began “to push their way into the national polity and economy” from the 1820s through 1850s (p. 8). Iowa seems an odd inclusion, yet the author explains that the importance of the state’s economy, its geographic location, and its timing of entry to the Union make it a reasonable adjunct to the study.

Siddali weaves two sets of conversations as she crafts her argument. The formal debates of the conventions sit at the center of her study,