

REVIEWS

Unsettling the West: Violence and State Building in the Ohio Valley

By Rob Harper

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. Pp. xvi, 250. Maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$47.50.)

Focusing on the years 1765 to 1795, Rob Harper presents a thought-provoking argument about the sources of violence in the Ohio Valley. It has been all too common, Harper contends, for historians to explain this violence as a product of hatred unleashed when government institutions were undeveloped or missing. The reality is different, he asserts: it was not the lack of government authority that spurred war and destruction. Instead, “the horrors of the period stemmed from governments’ intrusive presence” (p. 1). Colonists were more likely to launch and expand attacks on Ohio Indians when they found governmental resources available and could “manipulate” officialdom or state processes (pp. 28, 173). Ohio Indians faced the consequences of these manipulations but often held back from war with the colonists. (Harper uses the term

“colonist” for non-Indian colonizers of the Ohio Valley throughout the time period of his study, highlighting that colonization did not end but rather increased in the region after 1776). Shifts occurred, however, as in 1777, when “British and revolutionary officials funneled resources into the region” and “undercut peacemakers, tipping the political balance toward militancy” (p. 96).

The book is organized chronologically, with different periods representing different phases in the history of the region. Starting with 1765-72, which Harper describes as a time of “tenuous peace” (p. 24), the author shows how circumstances changed by 1774, after Virginia’s governor, John Murray, Earl of Dunmore, pushed for colonization into Kentucky. “Indians and colonists had disliked one another long before Dunmore arrived on the

scene,” Harper writes, “but it took the governor’s pursuit of land—and countless others’ pursuits of the governor’s patronage—to plunge the region into chaos” (p. 47). After Dunmore’s War, “relative peace” returned to the Ohio Valley, even though revolutionary conflict was breaking out in the East (p. 68). Harper then examines how limited governmental resources in the Ohio Valley worked against large-scale organizing for war during 1775-76, a time of “political and diplomatic creativity” when Indians and colonists were actively seeking “new coalition partners” (p. 94).

During the years 1777-79, Harper notes, a range of factors—among them “political disunity, logistical problems, and the vulnerability of noncombatants”—still discouraged Indians and colonists from going to war; however, the actions of government entities increasingly encouraged violence (p. 117). To prevent colonists from deserting the Ohio Valley and thus undercutting U.S. leaders’ hopes for profits from land speculation, Congress turned to the Continental Army’s role in the region. Around this same time, revolutionary governments firmed up laws for county militias. Instead of reducing the threat of war, these developments contributed to the extreme violence that Harper identifies with the next

phase, 1780-82. The murderers of the Moravian Indians at Gnadenhütten “set out for the mission towns on the orders of a state-appointed militia commander,” having mobilized according to the colony’s militia law, and “modeled their ‘campaign’ on previous expeditions led by Continental Army officers” (p. 122). In the years 1783-95, demands from the United States for land north of the Ohio River sparked further violence.

This well-researched book is rich in detail. Harper delves into the stories of leaders such as White Eyes (Delaware), Guyasuta (Seneca), Dunquat (Wyandot), and Cornstalk (Shawnee), the strategies they employed, and the relationships they pursued within this framework of the shifting roles of governments and empires. Harper closely examines colonists’ reliance on “local manifestations of state power,” for example in the discussion of George Rogers Clark in the 1780s (p. 161). Readers will also find helpful the well-done maps, given the variety of places that are crucial to this history.

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