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Conflict on the Michigan Frontier: Yankee and Borderland Cultures, 1815–1840

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Conflict on the Michigan Frontier: Yankee and Borderland Cultures, 1815–1840, by James Z. Schwartz. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009. viii, 184 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 cloth.

Reviewer Andrew Cayton is Distinguished Professor of History at Miami University. His books include *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780–1825* (1986); and *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (1990).

According to James Z. Schwartz, historians of North America have focused on “the rise and nature of borderlands, rather than on the techniques that anxious elites used to subdue them” (6). Schwartz seeks to remedy that deficiency in this brief history of the political origins of the state of Michigan.

With the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, emigrants from New England and New York, whom Schwartz calls Yankees, flooded into the Michigan Territory. Appalled by what they considered the barbaric “borderland or hybrid culture” (4) developed by American Indians and French settlers in the eighteenth century, the new arrivals parlayed their domination of territorial government and print culture, not to mention their sheer numbers, into efforts to establish well-defined legal and cultural boundaries. Their goal was to promote order and community defined by “a steadfast [Yankee] commitment to a calling or vocation, as well as to sobriety, industriousness, thriftiness, and evangelical Protestantism” (5). More specifically, they sought to remake the region in their own image, or perhaps in an idealized, improved variation on that image, imagining Michigan as a landscape of Protestant churches, public schools, homogeneous communities, stable families, and complementary gender roles.

Although Yankees disagreed on the best way to achieve their vision, they generally agreed that they had to wrest control of Michigan from its longtime residents if they were to transform a savage world of trade and fluid identity into ordered communities of hard-working, self-restraining, white men and women capable of sustaining democracy, practicing commercial agriculture, and ensuring domesticity. Schwartz shows how these attitudes shaped struggles for power in the Michigan Territory. Despite their differences, Yankees largely succeeded in transforming a borderland culture into a bordered society: They defended their territorial integrity against imperialistic Ohioans; created a state; supported internal improvements designed to facilitate communication and transportation; worked hard to remove or assimilate American Indians; passed legislation to regulate private morality, including restrictions on drinking; and generally defined people who were not like them as dirty and dangerous. Those people who clung

to the mores of an eighteenth-century hybrid society were lazy and licentious — the antithesis of good citizens. Indeed, as Schwartz shows in an excellent chapter on cholera, they were literally associated with epidemics of disease that killed individuals and threatened the very fabric of community.

Conflict on the Michigan Frontier is a useful monograph. But it is also seriously underdeveloped. Schwartz tends to deploy terms and offer generalizations that need more formal explanation. *Yankee* is the most obvious example; some attention to who these people were, where precisely they came from, and what the worlds they left behind looked like would have helped. (Susan Gray has done this kind of work in *The Yankee West: Community Life on the Michigan Frontier*, a 1996 book oddly missing from Schwartz's bibliography.) Similarly, while not many historians will be surprised by Schwartz's assertion that the objects of Yankee disdain resisted efforts to control their lives and exclude them from community and power, some will likely wish that he had detailed the process more fully and subtly. Above all, Schwartz ought to have elaborated more on his fascinating contention that "Michiganians neither created a totally new culture nor simply recreated the one in which they had been raised. Instead, they established a landscape that resembled, but was not identical to, that of the East" (11). Engaging more directly and rigorously with secondary literature on the fate of other borderland societies (such as Kentucky, Missouri, and especially Canada) might have encouraged deeper and more wide-ranging analysis of a common phenomenon.

Schwartz's book poses important questions about the imposition of a new order on an existing society as well as the evolution of regional cultural variations in the nineteenth-century United States. I generally agree with the arguments he offers in reply to those questions, but I wish he had done more, particularly in moving beyond newspaper accounts and politics, to analyze the nature of conflict on local and individual levels. Schwartz's able charting of the subjugation (or eradication) of a borderland culture would have benefited enormously from using a wider range of sources as well as integrating the story of the transformation of Michigan into similar stories about other places in North America — Iowa, for example.

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates, edited by Rodney O. Davis and Douglas L. Wilson. The Knox College Lincoln Studies Center Series. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009. xlvi, 341 pp. Textual annotations, glossary, index. \$35.00 cloth.