Wolf by the Ears: The Missouri Crisis, 1819-1821

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With this volume, John Van Atta has achieved an excellent synthesis of the best recent scholarship relevant to the Missouri Crisis. Alongside many of the works on which he draws, his achievement here should be seen as entirely superseding the book which for so long held this event to itself, Glover Moore’s 1953 study. (1) One of the most glaring flaws in Moore’s work was his strange contention that the concerns raised by the Missouri Crisis were almost entirely those of the political elite. By contrast, Van Atta draws on the recent historiography that shows deep and widespread popular engagement with the issues involved (p. 78), and this is but one of several sound interpretations he offers.

Van Atta’s overall argument centers on his contention that the Missouri Crisis and Compromises constituted ‘an indisputable turning point in the history of the early republic’, because they ‘amounted to a convergence of political, economic, and social disturbances – West, South, and North – that brought an end to the old order of American life and suggested the broad outlines of a new one’ (pp. 2, 4). Part of how he sustains this thesis is to devote significant attention to the complex roots of the controversy over the proposition of Congress restricting slavery in Missouri. He spends over a third of his text setting up the Missouri debate. That background effectively sets the stage, not only in Washington but also in the citizenry at large. The pre-existing concerns and grievances of common people and politicians alike, in the North, South, and the West (and in Missouri in particular) come into clear focus as a result of Van Atta’s extended treatment. (Incidentally, that makes it all the more curious that to transition from this background, he would choose an anecdote that suggests that Americans were shocked by the advent of the Missouri debate (see pp. 61-62). That not only is misleading in itself, but also cuts against the excellent groundwork he has laid for the preceding 60 pages.)

Both in this set-up and in telling the story of the Missouri Crisis and Compromises, Van Atta has made a series of smart narrative and interpretive choices. He provides concise but in-depth profiles of key leaders – including James Tallmadge on the Northern restrictionist side, and James and Philip P. Barbour of Virginia on the Southern anti-restrictionist side – that not only give a human face to these events but also spell out the political contexts in New York and Virginia that made these men leaders of their respective camps. He rightly makes Henry Clay the central character of his chapters on the crisis and the compromises that defused it in the short term. And more importantly, Van Atta refuses to caricature either Clay or other
members of the pro-compromise forces. Taking their concerns seriously, and detailing the variety of local and other competing interests and priorities that led them to support the compromises, greatly enrich his account.

Although strong on the background and the course of the crisis, this book falters a bit when dealing with the aftermath. The long chapter devoted to this theme ranges from the 1820s through the 1850s. That not only provides unnecessary discussion of well-known events in America’s long sectional crisis, but also gives unduly short shrift to the lesser-known but significant events in the 1820s that illuminate the immediate aftermath of Missouri. This chapter is hardly devoid of value. Its insights include the changing regard for the first Missouri Compromise in both the North and the South (most observers in both initially thought it a Southern victory, but by the time it was repealed by the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, Northerners were apt to talk about it as sacred), and detailed documentation of how many alarmed white Southerners blamed the Missouri debates for sparking Denmark Vesey’s 1822 plot against slavery. But those focused contributions only highlight by contrast how diffuse the rest of this chapter is. On the one hand, this underdevelopment of the 1820s can be excused rather easily by the embryonic state of the historical literature on that period. But on the other, for Van Atta to have done more justice to this decade would have amplified this book’s scholarly contribution as well as made his concluding chapter more focused.

Another critique worth mentioning is that Van Atta advertises a theme or thesis that he never makes completely clear. Observers’ sense of ‘the power that slavery by then had gained over American nation-building’, he asserts, ‘fueled both anti- and pro-slavery convictions’ (p. ix). But while he occasionally repeats this nation-building angle, that proves to be no substitute for clarifying exactly what this means. Van Atta comes the closest to clarifying his meaning towards the very end of the text, when he describes ‘two competing concepts of union’ at play in the Missouri Crisis – ‘an old one of sovereign states, by then traditional, being reasserted; a new one, more modern and nation-centered, germinating’ (p. 159). But especially for an audience that by design includes undergraduate students, that brief elaboration comes too little, too late for a theme or thesis for which Van Atta seems to have desired a central role.

Apropos of the undergraduate audience for which this book series seems in large part designed, this book seems likely to have mixed results with them. Its length – 161 pages of text – is well-designed for the classroom. But while the book is certainly not boring, neither could it be called a page-turner. To be fair, it would be exceedingly difficult to combine both a gripping narrative and the sort of broad synthesis of a vast range of scholarship, and Van Atta has arguably made the responsible choice by pursuing the second option. Suffice it to say that this book will therefore be more likely to be valuable to than beloved by undergraduate readers.

What scholars will take from this book will depend entirely on how well-versed they are in the burgeoning literatures relevant to the Missouri Crisis. But this episode could stand to be much better understood even by many scholars of the United States’ sectional crisis, so the scholarly audience that could benefit from this volume is large. And because Van Atta synthesizes so much scholarship, even the small (if growing) band of historians of the early national politics of slavery will derive benefits here and there throughout the narrative. Much of that literature has been focused on the national level, and even state-level studies privilege states well east of Missouri. Therefore, Van Atta’s repeated discussions of the political and social and economic developments in and outlook from Missouri will strike these specialists as of particular value. His precise examination of the somewhat shadowy second Missouri Compromise and the defiant reaction (from 1825 to 1847) of Missouri legislators (see 120–1) is just one example of this kind.

While this work is thus not without its flaws, they are almost entirely outweighed by its considerable strengths. It should stand for some time as an outstanding one-volume introduction to the Missouri Crisis and Compromises, set in a very wide context.

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