

Unsettling the West: Violence and State Building in the Ohio Valley. By Rob Harper. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 272 pages. \$45.00 cloth.

Rob Harper is not the first scholar to examine the Ohio Valley in the late eighteenth century, nor is he the first scholar to analyze the nature of colonization and the emergence of American authority in the region. A very abbreviated list of books covering similar topics includes Richard White's *The Middle Ground*, Patrick Griffin's *American Leviathan*, and Eric Hinderaker's *Elusive Empires*. In *Unsettling the West*, however, Harper provides new insight into many of the events and developments with which most scholars may assume they are already familiar. The book and its argument create an effective scaffold for understanding the intertwined nature of intercultural diplomacy, violence, and state power over the course of three decades from the 1760s to the 1790s. In the process, readers must reconsider the narratives that customarily shape this historical period.

At the core of *Unsettling the West* are the questions of how, when, why, and to what extremes did people shed the blood of others in the Ohio Valley before, during, and after the American Revolution. Harper argues that violence was connected to the emergence of the American state in a very particular way. The Native residents and Euro-American colonists of the region sought relationships with governing powers and hoped to forge beneficial relationships with those powers. When they had access to government resources, both Native peoples and colonists had a stronger foundation on which to pursue their respective goals. And where government support made violence more likely, government weakness meant that governing officials could not control the direction of the violence. Contrary to other scholarly interpretations, then, Harper asserts that rather than a governing presence leading to widespread peace, violence increased when governing authorities were part of the picture. Instead it was during periods of governing flux that less violent interactions predominated in the Ohio Valley.

Harper builds this argument in a series of chapters that focus on relatively short periods of time. For example, in the chapter titled "Opportunity, 1775–1776," he notes that the opening stages of the American Revolution did not spark violence in the Ohio Valley. "Rather than unleashing bloody chaos," he writes, "the collapse of imperial authority sparked political innovation" (68). In the pages that follow he describes in detail both the machinations of American colonists intent on moving into the territory that becomes Kentucky and the political maneuverings of Native communities seeking "alternative ways to secure sovereignty" (79). In the process Harper provides detailed descriptions and analyses of Dunmore's War, the diplomacy and death of the Delaware leader White Eyes, and other stories that illustrate his larger point that political expediency most often led to peace in the absence of state power. Just as important, the stories he tells demonstrate the manner in which the future of the Ohio Valley was as dependent on the actions of Native leaders and coalitions as it was on the attitudes of and decisions made by Euro-American colonists and governing authorities.

Once both British and American military leaders began to focus more of their respective resources on winning control of the Ohio Valley in the late 1770s, the level of violence rose once more. And though colonists and Native peoples capitalized on this shift, Harper illustrates that they continued to pursue their own goals and not those established by

outside forces. The Wyandot and Shawnee warriors who accepted British supplies and went to war against the colonists in 1777 and 1778 did so more to “secure British recognition of their boundaries” than to advance a British military strategy (98). On the other side of affairs, commanders of the Continental forces did not necessarily condone the violent atrocities committed by colonial militias in the Ohio Valley against noncombatants, but they also did not believe they could control the Ohio Valley by reining in those same militias. The shed blood of innocents was a price they were willing to pay.

Perhaps no incident better demonstrates the violence resulting from the infusion of government resources than the massacre of Native Moravian converts by Pennsylvania militia in March 1782 at Gnadenhutten. Harper’s description of this horror in all of its historical context is a piece of masterful storytelling. Even someone who knows this history will still be shaken by the atrocity. But the episode is also important because of how it supports the overall argument made in the book as whole. “Instead of a tool for enforcing official policy,” Harper writes, “the militia became a mechanism through which colonists redirected state resources for their own ends” (142). Increased government involvement continued to mean increased levels of violence.

If there is one somewhat disappointing aspect, it is that the final chapter appears to sweep through the events of the late 1780s and early 1790s that proved so critical for the American invasion of the Ohio country. After several chapters in which the author dissected the motives and decisions of colonists and Natives in great detail, the negotiations of treaties at Fort Finney and Fort Harmar appear to receive short shrift. Likewise, the military campaigns of the St. Clair, Harmar, and Wayne against the Northwest Indian Confederacy receive scant attention in comparison to the treatment of earlier developments. The overall point of the chapter is clear: the American government’s focus on securing the land in the Ohio Country for its citizens meant that violence between colonists and Natives would only continue. However, the road to the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794 seems to brush by a number of important episodes.

Any disappointment is mitigated by the realization that any one book cannot do everything. Harper’s intent is to focus on the period from 1773–1782, and those four chapters shed great light on the ebbs and flows of violence that dominated the history of the Ohio Valley during that period. This is a carefully written book in which each story and each chapter add to the strength of the argument. The author deftly uses a wide range of historical sources to support the narrative even as the narrative voice is very much his own. The detailed nature of the narrative might make the book a somewhat dense read for undergraduates, but the history itself is noteworthy and Harper adds substantially to our understanding of the period and the region. *Unsettling the West* makes a significant contribution to a historiography that is already strong.

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