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**Review of *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era*
By Nicole Etcheson**

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Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era. By Nicole Etcheson. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. xiv + 370 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.

Scholars have debated the meaning of “Bleeding Kansas” for generations. What impulses shaped the mid-1850s mayhem in Kansas Territory that came to be thought of as a “rehearsal” for the Civil War? Did the Kansas wars signify irreconcilable sectional differences over slavery? Or were the parties to the conflict driven chiefly by economic competition over claims, railroads, and towns? Neither, Nicole Etcheson argues, in her wide-ranging study of politics and personalities in Civil War era Kansas. Rather, “Bleeding Kansas” must be understood as a contest over the “political liberties of whites.” While other historians of sectional conflict have dealt with clashing conceptions of republicanism, Etcheson places such clashes specifically within the context of the failed promise of popular sovereignty. The Kansas-Nebraska Act bestowed unprecedented power upon the settlers themselves to decide the fate of slavery at the ballot box. Yet the lack of uniform residency and voting standards, along with voter fraud and official complicity in corrupt politics, thwarted the popular will repeatedly and fomented repression of the growing free-state majority in the territory. Free-state men from the East and West may have disagreed on the morality of slavery and the question of civil rights for African Americans, but they were united in their fidelity to the notion of white self-government as the very foundation of the republic created by the American Revolution. For pro-slavery men, on the other hand, slavery constituted private property and upheld social order; its preservation lay at the core of their notions of self-determination. Each side in “Bleeding Kansas,” therefore, saw itself as the guardian of revolutionary liberties.

The most compelling part of Etcheson’s work is its analysis of the Kansas struggle’s legacy for black rights. She suggests that the

conflict to define white liberty radicalized the free-state movement, eventually bolstering black freedom. The Wyandotte constitutional convention left open the option of black suffrage in a free Kansas. During the Civil War, Kansas troops and towns harbored black fugitives, and the state became the first unofficially to use African American troops. The memory of this era etched itself deeply into the “Exoduster” movement of the late nineteenth-century—the migration of southern blacks to the relative “Promiseland” of Kansas.

Exhaustively researched and documented, Etcheson’s splendid work persuades us to rethink not only the internal dynamics of the Kansas conflict, but, even more important, its larger meaning for the civil rights of all Americans.

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