PROJECT MUSE®

Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South (review)

Brian Schoen

American Studies, Volume 48, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 145-146 (Review)

Published by Mid-American Studies Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ams.0.0116>

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/375261>

both paid and unpaid work, exploring both its economic and social dimensions in village life from roughly the mid-eighteenth century through the first quarter of the nineteenth century. She also brings to the topic a sensitivity to its material culture dimensions which is particularly valuable. Building upon extensive research in both archives and collections of surviving clothing, Miller also places her narrative within the broader interpretive framework of the industrial and market revolutions that transformed New England in the period. The result is a rich and thoughtful study that makes deft contributions to women's, labor, and family history, while also speaking to the regional economic and social development transforming New England in the Revolutionary era. In a final chapter, she moves beyond the temporal focus of the study and writes intelligently about changing perspectives on early-national needlework over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As material culture study, social history, and intellectual history, *The Needle's Eye* has much to say to American studies scholars today.

Miller's introduction sets the broader framework and introduces readers to the Connecticut Valley, the primary geographical focus for the study. The carefully organized study moves through three sections: a first part focusing on clothing production and consumption; a second exploring the lives of six needlewomen whose experiences and surviving sources illuminate different aspects of the development of the needletrades in and around the town of Hadley, Massachusetts; and a final one that broadens the perspective, placing the transformation of the needletrades in this period within the broader economic transformation of New England and within changing perceptions of needlewomen and their craft in subsequent years.

This is a nuanced and complex work that contributes new knowledge on many levels. The way in which cooperative needlework among the rural gentry helped to constitute a female elite in the Connecticut Valley is a striking and original finding. Miller shows how quilting among the wealthy depended upon the contributions of their servants and slaves and played an important role in the visiting and socializing that marked elite women as a cut above their neighbors. Miller's analysis of needlework employment distinguishes among three groups: tailoresses who did plain work in the homes of their customers, skilled dressmakers who fit, cut, and stitched women's gowns, and women who worked on men's clothing, competing more directly with male tailors. Two broader points emerge over the course of the case studies. First, that needleworkers rarely kept accounts of their own but that considerable evidence of their work can be teased out of the account books of their fathers and husbands. Second, the study of needleworkers reminds us that women could be artisans, but that they did so on terms that were quite different from those of men. The clear implication is that overly male-centered criteria have defined artisan work and culture in ways that have blinded historians to female participation in artisan crafts. Marla Miller makes a real contribution by viewing artisan work through a gendered lens, reminding all in the historical trade of the value of this new perspective.

State University of New York at Binghamton

Thomas Dublin

SLAVE COUNTRY: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South. By Adam Rothman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2005.

American historians have long studied the settlement of the Old Northwest. Jefferson's draft legislation restricting slavery and the spread of democratic institutions provide a compelling picture of how founding visions played out in western lands. Adam Rothman's *Slave County* joins recent examinations of the Old Southwest by James Miller, Daniel

Usner, Thomas Ingersoll, Edward Baptist, Walter Johnson, and others to provide an equally revealing, if less uplifting, window into the early decades of the American experiment.

Rothman begins with Jefferson's utopian commercial-agrarianism and his earnest hope that diffusion might ameliorate and eventually end slavery in North America. Drawing upon the best that social, intellectual, economic, and political history has to offer, he then describes how international developments (British industrialization, the spread of cotton, heightened demand for sugar after St. Domingue's slave rebellion) and calculated decisions (largely guided by white America's "civilizing" impulse) inaugurated the displacement of Native Americans and the spread of African slavery. Adeptly moving between the local, national, and international stages, Rothman describes well-known events such as the Louisiana Purchase and Missouri Controversy, while bringing to light less studied local people and events, including the efforts of Quaker surveyor Isaac Briggs and a fascinating account of the 1811 German Coast insurrection ("the largest slave rebellion in the history of the United States," 74). In climactic fashion, Jackson's exploits against the Creeks and victory at New Orleans unexpectedly transformed a tenuously-controlled region into an "arena for the United States' greatest wartime triumphs." The war thus "reinforced the American's providential view" and the "rhetoric of freedom obliterated the reality of slavery" (160-161). By 1820 commerce and collaboration as well as "terror and violence" between ethnically-diverse peoples had transformed the Deep South, not into Jefferson's idyllic image, but into a generally-stable slave society and bulwark for proslavery national politics.

Rothman's broadly and deeply researched portrait challenges deeply held assumptions that population pressures inevitably drove expansion while a complacent federal government struggled to define it. At every point in his story, Rothman argues, "U.S. sovereignty shaped the Deep South." The federal government "absorbed the region through diplomacy and conquest, administered its territorial governments . . . encouraged economic development. . . . through nation-building measures that included the survey and sale of public lands, the improvement of the transportation infrastructure, . . . the imposition of a tariff on foreign sugar . . . [and] allow[ing] the transfer of slaves into the region" (218-219). In this sense, the book's title reflects both Rothman's desire to show how contingent choices and broad processes shaped Deep South society and his conviction that the extension of slavery there reveals much about the nation as a whole.

Many of the events and developments in this book are covered more exhaustively in other monographs. Yet, Rothman's gift lies in his ability to succinctly and cleverly contextualize and synthesize complicated events and processes. *Slave Country* is well-suited for upper-level undergraduates and graduate classes and promises to become the standard account of the settlement of the Old Southwest.

Ohio University

Brian Schoen

YOUNG MEN AND THE SEA: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail. By Daniel Vickers with Vince Walsh. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 2005.

As many historians have observed, the Atlantic maritime culture of the Age of Sail was unique in many ways. At the same time, for most New England mariners of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, seafaring was but one stage in a life arc that often encompassed rural farmwork, employment along seaport waterfronts, or incipient entrepreneurial efforts. One scholar who demonstrates a keen understanding of the multifaceted experience of these sailors is Daniel Vickers. In *Young Men and the Sea*, as in his previous work *Farmers and Fishermen*, Vickers presents the full spectrum of these