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Wolf by the Ears: The Missouri Crisis, 1819–1821 by John
R. Van Atta (review)

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tion of unused stovepipe / standing unsnapped and open / like somebody's coat, and in it / the thin blue smoke of spiderwebs."

Near the end, there is a short essay called, "Small Rooms in Time." Those familiar with Kooser's work will not be surprised to find prose pinned into the final pages of this collection, and while Kooser is mainly known as a poet, his nonfiction—such as *Local Wonders* (2004) and *The Wheeling Year* (2014)—mark him as a literary artist with gifts beyond one genre. In "Small Rooms in Time," he recalls a murder in Nebraska, one that took place in a house where he once lived years ago. To read this essay is to be reminded that Kooser should be celebrated for his prose just as strongly as he is celebrated for his poetry.

Splitting an Order is a remarkable collection from a writer who proves that the local does indeed hold the universal. It closes, appropriately enough, with a short poem that is simply titled, "Right Hand." In it, Kooser says, "This old hand with which I am writing, / holding its pen and pecking its way / across paper like a hen, has pulled me, / clucking with little discoveries, / across more than seventy years." He adds that, "looking back, it seems that every day / was rich with interest." That is the beauty of reading this volume of exquisite and perceptive words—we too see the world, rich with interest.

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John R. Van Atta, *Wolf by the Ears: The Missouri Crisis, 1819–1821*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. 216 pp. \$19.95.

Balanced and brief. Those two adjectives provide a good summary of my review of John Van Atta's *Wolf by the Ears*. I fear, though, they diminish the accomplishments of the book. After all, what we take to be glowing reviews more often feature the antonyms to these descriptive terms. Rather than "balanced" and "brief," the reviews that make their way on to back cover blurbs more typically extol volumes as "bold" and "weighty." But Van Atta's book should remind us how much can be said in a brief text and how much there is to be said for a carefully balanced interpretation.

Wolf by the Ears is certainly not daringly revisionist. Primarily a work of synthesis, its first two chapters describe the confrontations that anticipat-

ed the Missouri Crisis, both at the national level and in the western lands that were to become the focal point for conflict over the expansion of slavery. Here, Van Atta includes a discussion of how “recent scholarship” has detailed the use and spread of unfree labor in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys before their settlement by American citizens, correctly noting that “the United States did not so much *create* an empire for slavery as it *acquired* one” (31). Two chapters then track the storms across the nation and in Washington, D.C., that brought impasse and compromise. As the book’s final chapter recounts, the compromise gained Missouri statehood, but it did not resolve the crisis. The aftermath of the Missouri Crisis, Van Atta makes clear, simmered and boiled for four decades before Civil War tore the nation apart. That trajectory is a conventional one, and for the most part Van Atta’s interpretation of the Missouri Crisis will be familiar to scholars whose monographs fill the book’s endnotes and bibliographic essay.

Nor is *Wolf by the Ears* a weighty work, if that adjective connotes a large number of pages. True, as the above outline of the table of contents shows, the book stretches back several decades to uncover the origins of the Missouri Crisis and carries forward a similar span of time to examine the denouement of the compromise. The chronology suggests the subtitle of *Wolf by the Ears* is misleading. Only around sixty of its pages are devoted to the period from 1819 to 1821. And yet, while its span is far more expansive than its subtitle advises, the book, minus its endnotes and bibliographic essay, weighs in at a mere 161 pages of text.

Not that these should be taken as critiques of the book. In fact, *Wolf by the Ears* deserves praise for what it incorporates within those pages. The book deftly integrates recent and older scholarship to construct a compelling and readable account, not just of the Missouri Crisis, but of the conflicts over slavery and between sections that shaped the history of the United States from the founding of the republic to the Civil War. It also shifts effectively between developments in the states, and, in particular, in Missouri and in the nation’s capital. For these reasons, *Wolf by the Ears* should be valued by scholars seeking a quick overview of antebellum American political history. More than just short, yet comprehensive, Van Atta’s account is comprehensible, which should make it especially valuable to students, who should welcome its inclusion on course syllabi.

Students can also join the debate about which section “won” the Missouri Compromise. Van Atta quotes from the memoir of Missouri’s long-time senator Thomas Hart Benton, who viewed it as an “immense conces-

sion” by the South and a “clear gain to the antislavery side” (123). Van Atta, however, concludes the opposite about “who got the better of the deal?” His simple answer: “The South.” Benton’s recollections to the contrary, “few southern leaders ever believed they had actually ‘compromised’ in any serious way.” Instead, most southern slaveholders accepted the free labor semi-encirclement of Missouri, at least, for now” (99). That was because they recognized that lands in which slavery was restricted held little promise. And, in exchange, for this concession, “the slave states got what they wanted most: a victory of state self-determination, and, with that, a temporary repulsing of antislavery nation building designs for the trans-Mississippi West” (100). Only later, as Benton’s memoir attests, did calculations shift and convictions about who won and lost change.

At other points as well, Van Atta stakes out controversial ground, at least as far as recent historiography is concerned. Consider, for example, Van Atta’s portrait of Henry Clay. Reviewing Clay’s handling of the Missouri Crisis and considering it alongside his broader political economic vision, Van Atta rescues the Great Compromiser’s reputation from scholarship that has of late regarded him “with suspicion, underestimated his economic vision, and dismissed him as a mere political opportunist, especially on slavery.” Van Atta insists instead that Clay’s “words and actions must be taken in context, judged not by how opponents saw him or against prevailing values of today” (93).

That last point is one all historians would do well to remember. It is essential if we are to produce balanced histories—and better histories too.

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Angie Maxwell, *The Indicted South: Public Criticism, Southern Inferiority, and the Politics of Whiteness*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 311 pp. \$34.95.

Psychologists such as Peter Jason Rentfrow already recognize the existence of American regional differences in personality. Historians thinking along the same lines are building on classic works such as W. J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South* to inquire about regional psychologies and their historical im-