

## Book Reviews

*Frontier Illinois*, by James E. Davis. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998. xxi, 515 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

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James E. Davis's *Frontier Illinois* is the fourth volume in a series on the states of the trans-Appalachian frontier. The authors in the series have been given wide latitude in determining their approach to the subject. Unlike the earlier works on the Ohio, Indiana, and Wisconsin frontiers, Davis has chosen to view Illinois's early history through a long-range lens. He rarely focuses on events within individual communities; instead, he examines statewide trends in separate chapters and then uses local examples to illustrate his points. His approach is ultimately successful because he also shows that Illinois's frontier experience is part of a wider national (and, indeed, international) frontier history.

Davis contends that Illinois history before the Civil War was shaped by the natural environment, by the people who inhabited the area, and by outside events and people whose larger contexts influenced Illinois's development. He shows that, because most of the state was glaciated during the last Ice Age, its land is fairly flat, it has a deep topsoil, and it is well drained. This has given it an inviting environment since at least 8000 B.C.E. It has also meant that the state's land area, situated between two major watersheds (the Mississippi River and the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence), has served as a crossroads for people intent on settling and exploiting the continent. He also contends that, even with the arrival and departure of many different groups of peoples with varying intentions, the frontier period in Illinois was unusually peaceful; violence was rare and mitigated by a cultural consensus about appropriate behavior.

The book's considerable coverage of the people of Illinois before the arrival of Europeans is refreshing. Davis clearly shows how the favorable environment of the state attracted prehistoric peoples and how it supported one of the most sophisticated civilizations in the

world long before the Columbian voyages: Cahokia, a city near present-day St. Louis, contained 20,000 people of the Mississippian culture. He brings the history of prehistoric inhabitants seamlessly forward into the historic era, when various groups of people moved into and out of the state, depending on events and trends farther to the east and north. He also shows how the Indian groups created, along with the French settlers, a "middle ground culture."

The bulk of the book, however, is devoted to the history of Illinois after the British and then the Americans claimed and settled the area. Davis examines this century-long frontier (from British sovereignty in 1763 to the beginning of the Civil War in 1861) through a topical approach. He devotes chapters to the politics of early statehood, the effects of nationwide transportation developments, the variety of cultures among the migrants and immigrants who settled the state, the economics of land rush settlement, the effects of racial, ethnic, and class prejudices, and the dynamics of community formation. Through his analysis of settlement in Illinois, Davis places his study within the larger framework of national frontier history. When he returns to the historiographical debate over whether frontier societies were typically violent and conflict-ridden (as popular opinion holds) or generally peaceful and consensual (as recent community historians of the frontier have illustrated), Davis points out that, in the case of Illinois, frontier settlement appears to have been amazingly peaceful, even when settlers brought deeply ingrained assumptions that differed from those of their neighbors. He is particularly successful in showing that, even over the issue of slavery, settlers were likely to agree to disagree.

*Frontier Illinois* is refreshing because it does not concentrate on the settlement of Chicago. Too often, historians of the state have looked backward to assume the importance of the city even though it was not a factor until late in the frontier period. Instead, Davis concentrates on the south-to-north settlement of the state and shows how its earliest settlers from the upland South initially controlled state politics and affected the state's role in the Civil War. The book, in this respect, will be a worthwhile companion to William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*.

Davis consistently places Illinois's frontier history within a national context. He concludes his volume with a discussion of when and why the state's frontier came to an end, showing how, when its people could easily plug into the national economy and could consciously shed their perceptions of isolation in the 1850s, the frontier had come to a close. It is here, therefore, that Davis concludes his book.

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