

Gray, Edward G. *Mason-Dixon: Crucible of the Nation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023. 456 pages. Hardcover, \$35.00

The author of this extensively researched and finely written book, a recently deceased professor of History at Florida State University, Edward Gray, makes a convincing case that the meaning of the Mason-Dixon line changed over time, and those changes interacted with the fundamental political debates unfolding during those defining and often very violent times. This book takes a multi-faceted approach to one of the memorable aspects of early American history. It covers the period from the early colonial period to the end of the Civil War with some rather cursory attention to the events immediately after the War ended when the line became much less significant. The book is exquisitely researched and lays out the facts in intricate detail. It masterfully weaves together strains of new details that thicken the sketchy accounts that sometimes accompany narratives of this time period. The demarcation of the line itself by Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon is a minor but interesting element of the narrative. Throughout, the main focus is on the relations between Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware.

Gray introduces a key concept that strengthens his analysis and keeps the narrative moving. This is “borderlands,” which pertains to the areas near one of the borders between Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware. Of course, the land was not important unless it had political and social connections. What is significant in this terminology is that governments tended to neglect the borderlands because they could not easily collect taxes because the citizen would claim to be from a different state or colony. Because of this, borderlands tended to be very fluid and violent, with citizens being responsible for their own security. The point of the Mason-Dixon Line was to bring order to this disorderly situation. But this was not easily accomplished.

At the center of this narrative is the notion that lines on maps, even those carefully surveyed, are not as precise as they appear and they do not, in fact, define separate realms. In this, the author takes on the natural assumption that what we think of as important lines separating colonies were not clear at all prior to the Mason-Dixon line, which was completed in the very late eighteenth century. Categories of all sorts were nebulous and not fixed. Settlers did not know which colony they lived in. Governments did not know who to tax and had difficulty collecting taxes from those in the borderlands. If governments could not collect taxes, they would not protect the settlers from attacks by Native Americans.

For some of the folks living in the borderlands, the Mason-Dixon Line was of little or no importance. White people had essentially the same rights regardless of which side of the line they were on. For Black Americans, the line divided the realm of freedom from slavery. Some Black Americans were slaves, while others in the same region were free Blacks. Some Indians were hostile, and some were not. The point is that with so much fluidity, there was more ambiguity than governments could comfortably tolerate.

This book takes the Mason-Dixon Line seriously, and the rest of the events and actions leading to the Revolution, Constitution, and Civil War are seen only as they are connected to issues involving the borderlands. For example, the French and Indian Wars come into the narrative early on, but there is little about the major issues and diplomatic efforts to resolve them. But the French and Indian Wars figure into this narrative because they had very direct and serious impacts on the borderlands. Readers of this work will come away from it with a much deeper understanding of the issues that shaped our earlier years and how complex diplomatic life was like a couple of centuries ago. During the colonial period the relations between the colonies and the government in London were nebulous and always in flux. Relations between the whites

and Native Americans were evolving in sometimes peaceful and sometimes brutally violent ways. And, of course, the relations between whites, Blacks, and the Constitution were never far from the center of American politics for the first century (and to this day).

At times some of the unfamiliar details seemed obscure but typically it was only a page or less before the narrative gets back on track. As someone who was born and raised in one of the borderlands, this was a thoroughly enjoyable and highly enlightening book to read. While many of the names in the narrative were unknown to me, there were plenty of choices the author made to make sure that I did not stay lost for long. For example, one chapter is devoted to two well-known men who both came from similar initial situations in the borderlands and came to play consequential roles in the decades leading to the Civil War. One became President James Buchanan and the other became Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney. Buchanan was the last president before Lincoln was elected, and Taney wrote the infamous Dred Scott Decision. What comes through these accounts is that in the borderlands, politicians favored the middle ground. On one hand, they did not have anything in common with the northern abolitionists. Instead, their primary interests were in preserving the constitutional status quo. The key issue came to what to do with fugitive slaves who crossed north of the Mason-Dixon line. Southerners, of course, wanted their property returned and felt they had the right to go north and kidnap the fugitive and bring him or her back. Abolitionists and northern states' rights folks were adamantly opposed. From here the path to war is clear. In fact, the author claims that the Mason-Dixon Line was instrumental in contributing to the Civil War.

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