

# Religious Newspapers in the Old Northwest to 1861: a History, Bibliography, and Record of Opinion

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sociological analysis and local history, in which he successfully blends accurate quantitative information with authoritative commentary on men and events. As a sociological study, his book belongs on the same shelf with *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County* (1959) by Merle Curti and others—to which Doyle is admittedly indebted. As a history of an early Illinois town, it ranks with Paul Angle's *"Here I Have Lived": A History of Lincoln's Springfield, 1821-1865* (1935)—which depicts the growth of Jacksonville's chief rival during the same period of time.

In short, *The Social Order of a Frontier Community*—which includes tables of census information, a bibliographical essay, and twenty mid-nineteenth-century lithographs—should be of considerable interest to sociologists and historians of the early Midwest.

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*Religious Newspapers in the Old Northwest to 1861: A History, Bibliography, and Record of Opinion*, by Wesley Norton. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1977. pp. xi, 196. \$12.50.

In this book Wesley Norton presents the pre-Civil War mid-western religious newspaper as one aspect of the special interest press of nineteenth-century America. As an activist press it had a point of view to express both through a strong editorial policy and an unabashedly slanted interpretation of the news. The religious press simply presented local, regional, and national news from a religious standpoint. To a researcher who has usually dismissed the multitude of small, short-lived newspapers often with eccentric titles as probably containing little more than moral sayings, parables, and homilies designed to reinforce the already pious and offer helpful hints to Sunday school teachers and ministers with writer's block, this view of the religious press comes as something of a surprise. But Mr. Norton's study is a

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well-documented, though brief, account with an appended bibliography and union list of religious newspapers, and it presents a generally accurate picture of their value for historical research.

The picture of the typical antebellum religious newspaper that emerges from this work is one of a thinly financed enterprise controlled by a rapid succession of editors and publishers who sought to promote a particular viewpoint and who did so in the strongest terms until their capital was expended and their creditors could no longer be put off. The newspaper then suspended publication and was replaced by another with equally strong opinions and weak finances. For the most part, this description would fit most special interest newspapers in the nineteenth century, from the minor political party organs to the proponents of various labor and agricultural movements or the agitators for social reform, whether arguing from a religious base or not. There were, however, a few characteristics that were unique to religious newspapers. For example, the publishers were sometimes regional or national church organizations. This meant that their editors were often selected for their ability to present a common, conciliatory editorial policy approved by the central organization. This gave more unity to the newspapers published by a single denomination than could usually be found among the special interest press associated with a political or social movement.

But it is the similarities between the religious newspapers and the special interest press as a whole that make them valuable for historical research. Their editors went beyond inspirational boilerplate homilies to comment on local issues ranging from the need for improved sidewalks to corruption in city government and on national issues ranging from Indian removal to the slavery question. In fact, probably the best chapter in Norton's book concerns the evolution of the religious press' position on slavery, from hostility to the abolitionists in the 1830s, to outspoken political antislavery sentiment in the 1850s. It is difficult to judge the influence of the religious newspapers in shaping the thinking of their readers. Certainly the circulation lists of most were quite small, usually only a few thousand subscribers. But the religious press can certainly be said to reflect, if not to mold,

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an important segment of the American mind in the nineteenth century.

If the twentieth century is the age of sociology, then the first half of the nineteenth century was part of the age of religion. Americans tended to think about social problems in religious terms. Slavery was not simply an inefficient economic system that harmed both the slaveholder and slave alike, it was a moral evil. Opposition to the extension of slavery was not a social or economic program, it was a holy crusade. When the editors of the religious press dealt with issues in these terms, they reflected the thinking of a large part of the population. It is precisely this that makes the antebellum religious newspaper a valuable historical source, and Norton's work is a valuable introductory study of this source.

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*Shiloh—in Hell before Night*, by James Lee McDonough. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977. pp. xii, 260. \$9.95.

Confusion and ineptness characterized the fledgling armies of the North and South during the first year of the Civil War. Something of a carnival spirit, fostered by a belief that one major battle would decide the war, affected the unseasoned recruits and the more experienced commanders as well. The hopes for a short conflict and the somewhat cavalier approach to war by some died an agonizing death at Shiloh. The carnage of this battle, its causes and consequences, are documented in James Lee McDonough's *Shiloh—in Hell before Night*.

McDonough asserts that the Confederates had the chance to turn the Union army's lightly defended left flank and destroy the forces of General Ulysses S. Grant. This would have turned the Union tide in the West and perhaps prevented the Yankees from severing Confederate east-west communications. The Confederates had to win to keep from being split by a Union wedge. Due to the confusion between Confederate Generals Al-

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