

Frontier Democracy: Constitutional Conventions in the Old Northwest

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While debunking the famous legend that the U.S. military conspired with the federal government to eradicate the herds, Flores highlights the oft-cited words attributed to General Philip Sheridan about “destroying the Indian’s commissary” and traces them to a fabrication by a Texas hide hunter named John Cook. In fact, the army officer actually declared, “I consider it important that this wholesale slaughter of the Buffalo should be stopped” (131). Beset with environmental changes, exotic diseases, and unregulated hunting, the bison barely escaped extinction.

With a lyrical flourish, Flores concludes the book with a sentimental call to “re-wild” the Great Plains. Like many naturalists, he acknowledges that the prairie is as sublime as canyons, mountains, and forests. He touts the ongoing efforts to create parks and preserves, although most have fallen short of artist George Catlin’s vision of 1832. Anyone who has driven across this vast country sees its emptiness, encountering many places in the grasslands that remind the author of “a dustier Iowa, with more than a hint of ammonia, feedlots, and hog farms” (162). Flores hopes that future visitors will encounter a more romantic landscape, where large animals and human beings might play.

My only disappointment in Flores’s book stems from the absence of endnotes, footnotes, or other forms of citation. His bibliography lists 12 pages of published materials but gives no record of archives and collections for further research on the last big animals. Such additions to the book would have made his passionate plea on behalf of this lost world even more noteworthy.

Frontier Democracy: Constitutional Conventions in the Old Northwest, by Silvana R. Siddali. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. xv, 392 pp. Illustrations, tables, maps, notes, index. \$120 hardcover.

Reviewer John Dinan is professor of politics and international affairs at Wake Forest University. He is the author of *The American State Constitutional Tradition* (2006) and *Keeping the People’s Liberties: Legislators, Citizens, and Judges as Guardians of Rights* (1998).

Scholars have recently begun paying long overdue attention to the more than 230 state constitutional conventions held since 1776. Although no conventions have been called during the past 30 years, the longest such gap in American history, they were once held regularly to frame inaugural state constitutions or revise existing constitutions, albeit more often in some states than others. In fact, 14 state constitutions currently require that referenda on whether to call a convention be held at periodic intervals, as in Iowa where a referendum is considered every ten years, most recently in 2010.

In *Frontier Democracy: Constitutional Conventions in the Old Northwest*, Silvana R. Siddali analyzes conventions held from the 1830s to the 1850s in the six states created from the Northwest Territory as well as Iowa. These include conventions in Illinois (1847), Indiana (1850–51), Iowa (1844, 1846, 1857), Michigan (1835, 1850), Minnesota (1857), Ohio (1850–51), and Wisconsin (1846, 1848). Several of these conventions tried to draft inaugural constitutions but were unsuccessful, as when Iowa’s 1844 convention drafted a constitution that was defeated by voters when it became ensnared in debates about the boundary with Missouri. Other conventions were successful in framing inaugural constitutions; for instance, Iowa’s 1846 convention crafted a constitution that was ratified by voters and served as the state’s foundational document for just over a dozen years. In still other cases, conventions made changes of varying significance to existing constitutions, as when Iowa’s 1857 convention framed the state’s current constitution.

Delegates at these conventions addressed a range of topics, including “black people’s rights, banks and paper money, married women’s property rights, the power of the legislature, and the authority of the judiciary” (4). A number of these conventions were reacting to the Panic of 1837 and subsequent failure of internal improvement projects and default on debt payments in a number of states. These developments prompted widespread approval of constitutional provisions barring legislatures from investing in roads, canals, and railroads and limiting legislators’ ability to charter banks and borrow money. Throughout this period, convention delegates also responded to popular pressures to democratize governing institutions by providing for popular election of judges and a wide range of executive officials. In other cases—and this is a particular focus of Siddali’s book—convention delegates were responding to petitions from African Americans and women, “who would certainly never have been permitted to serve as delegates” but nevertheless participated in “parallel reform conferences that met while several of the constitutional conventions were in session” and placed issues of African American suffrage and women’s rights on the conventions’ agenda and occasionally resulted in proposals being submitted for a popular vote, even if they generally did not lead to enactment of constitutional provisions (19).

In analyzing convention debates on these topics—the book is organized thematically, with chapter titles such as “judges,” “land rights,” “places,” “citizens,” “wives,” and “banks”—Siddali explains that *Frontier Democracy* “is primarily a book about conversations rather than about foundational documents” (2). As she notes, “The outcomes of the convention debates represented the difference between a decent, worth-

while, prosperous life and a corrupt, degraded, impoverished existence," given that "new state constitutions would frame governments, delineate rights, clarify the state's physical boundaries, and empower all the branches of government" (4–5). But she is less concerned with analyzing what she views as "largely predictable outcomes" than with exploring the "public and private conversations" that took place in and out of the conventions and delving into the "philosophical, spiritual, and political roots" of "northwestern opinions on constitutional matters" (10).

In exploring "the full panoply of the private, public, and political conversations" (18), Siddali draws on transcripts of convention debates, which are available for conventions in these states from the 1850s onward. But conventions called in these states in the 1830s and 1840s chose not to keep transcripts, opting instead to keep a journal of motions, resolutions, and votes, while relying on newspapers to publish the speeches in accounts that attracted a wide readership (60–61). Siddali also goes well beyond these official sources by compiling extensive information on the political experience, education, and wealth of convention delegates. She also examines delegates' papers and correspondence to gain insight into the convention proceedings, which featured impressive displays of erudition but also "devolved into noisy, chaotic, disorganized messes" and occasionally led to "fisticuffs" (56, 57).

Frontier Democracy is an exhaustively researched account that provides fresh perspectives on several aspects of antebellum northwestern state conventions, most importantly in the attention given to the role of African Americans and women's groups outside the convention halls in trying to gain a hearing for various issues. As Siddali shows, groups influenced the convention proceedings in part by holding conferences alongside convention proceedings—and with some success, as when members of the Ohio Colored Citizens League held a convention at the same time as Ohio's 1850–51 convention and "insisted on (and won) a meeting with the convention delegates, a concession that suggests that they were able to participate in the conversation about reforming their state government" (1). Conventions also "received petitions from free black people and from their white supporters" calling for "black rights" and occasionally "proposing suffrage for black citizens" (281). In some states, as in Illinois and Indiana, the principal question at the conventions was whether to permit "black persons to migrate into the state"; but in other conventions delegates took up the question of African American "voting rights" (267), most notably when Iowa's 1857 convention agreed to submit the question to a popular vote, where it was defeated overwhelmingly. In detailing the various ways that groups secured a hearing and occasional votes on citizenship issues in ante-

bellum Northwest state constitutional conventions and analyzing the resulting debates in and out of these conventions, Siddali has broadened the scholarly focus and made a fine contribution to standard accounts.

Ioway Life: Reservation and Reform, 1837–1860, by Greg Olson. Civilization of the American Indian Series 275. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016. xx, 163 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 hardcover.

Reviewer John P. Bowes is professor of history at Eastern Kentucky University. He is the author of *Land Too Good for Indians: Northern Indian Removal* (2016) and *Exiles and Pioneers: Eastern Indians in the Trans-Mississippi West* (2007).

In *Ioway Life*, Greg Olson focuses on a brief period of critical transitions and transformations in the history of the Ioways. A treaty signed with the federal government in 1836 formalized a cession of their lands in Missouri and arranged for their removal to a reserve in what is now Nebraska and Kansas. Over the next 20-plus years the federal government and its agents sought to alter the Ioway way of life. In short, the federal government wanted the Ioways to become Christian farmers. Despite successful Ioway resistance to such measures, Olson argues, these years before the Civil War laid the foundation for the cultural changes that would occur in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Colonialism is a powerful force. Olson asserts that, although “the accomplishments of the agents and missionaries were decidedly mixed,” the seeds for the success of their overall policies were planted during the years they operated under the auspices of the Great Nemaha Agency.

This book is brief, with only about 135 pages of text, and the chapters are organized more along thematic than strictly chronological lines. Following a short chapter to explain events leading to the Ioway relocation to the reservation on the south bank of the Great Nemaha River, Olson examines the impact of Christian missionaries and their unsuccessful efforts to convert Indians in their first decade on the reserve. As the next chapter demonstrates, the school established by Presbyterian missionaries in the mid-1840s experienced similar failures as a result of weak government support, missionary miscalculation, and Ioway resistance. In the fourth and fifth chapters Olson focuses on politics, first illustrating the transformation in Ioway leadership and then explaining how bureaucratic incompetence and corruption undermined the federal government’s Indian policy on the reservation. This narrative draws to a conclusion with an examination of events that compromised the Ioway reservation, specifically the Kansas-Nebraska Act and federal efforts to institute allotment. The Ioways signed their last treaty with