Conflict on the Michigan Frontier: Yankee and Borderland Cultures, 1815–1840

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Reviewer Andrew Cayton is Distinguished Professor of History at Miami University. His books include The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780–1825 (1986); and The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region (1990).

According to James Z. Schwartz, historians of North America have focused on “the rise and nature of borderlands, rather than on the techniques that anxious elites used to subdue them” (6). Schwartz seeks to remedy that deficiency in this brief history of the political origins of the state of Michigan.

With the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, emigrants from New England and New York, whom Schwartz calls Yankees, flooded into the Michigan Territory. Appalled by what they considered the barbaric “borderland or hybrid culture” (4) developed by American Indians and French settlers in the eighteenth century, the new arrivals parlayed their domination of territorial government and print culture, not to mention their sheer numbers, into efforts to establish well-defined legal and cultural boundaries. Their goal was to promote order and community defined by “a steadfast [Yankee] commitment to a calling or vocation, as well as to sobriety, industriousness, thriftiness, and evangelical Protestantism” (5). More specifically, they sought to remake the region in their own image, or perhaps in an idealized, improved variation on that image, imagining Michigan as a landscape of Protestant churches, public schools, homogeneous communities, stable families, and complementary gender roles.

Although Yankees disagreed on the best way to achieve their vision, they generally agreed that they had to wrest control of Michigan from its longtime residents if they were to transform a savage world of trade and fluid identity into ordered communities of hard-working, self-restraining, white men and women capable of sustaining democracy, practicing commercial agriculture, and ensuring domesticity. Schwartz shows how these attitudes shaped struggles for power in the Michigan Territory. Despite their differences, Yankees largely succeeded in transforming a borderland culture into a bordered society: They defended their territorial integrity against imperialistic Ohioans; created a state; supported internal improvements designed to facilitate communication and transportation; worked hard to remove or assimilate American Indians; passed legislation to regulate private morality, including restrictions on drinking; and generally defined people who were not like them as dirty and dangerous. Those people who clung