

KIRKUS REVIEWS

CLASH OF EXTREMES: The Economic Origins of the Civil War

A broad, revisionist assessment of the causes of the Civil War.

Slavery was not high on that list, writes Egnal (History/York Univ.; *Divergent Paths: How Culture and Institutions Have Shaped North American Growth*, 1996, etc.), who insists that "the current emphasis on slavery as the cause of the Civil War is fraught with problems." That emphasis imputes to the Republican Party a kind of selfless humanitarianism, a willingness to go to war over issues of human dignity. But the picture is inaccurate, writes Egnal. The abolitionists within and without the Republican Party were few, and while the majority of its members and leaders agreed that slavery was an undesirable thing, no one was in a hurry to do anything about it. Abolition became a mandate only well into the war, when it was clear that declaring an end to slavery would serve to hasten Confederate defeat. Egnal delineates the economic differences among Whig, Republican and Democrat, and between regions of the country and classes of workers within those regions. He notes, for instance, that portions of the South that had voted Whig—a party whose members merged with the Republicans in 1852—and grew grain instead of tobacco tended to resist secession, while country people in the border states and even points north sided with the Confederacy against their urban neighbors. Critical in the increase of tensions between North and South was the development of a strong regional economy in the Great Lakes region, one both industrial in nature and oriented to Northern rather than Southern shipping lanes and ports. Even after the war ended, the issue of slavery was scarcely settled, as many Southern blacks were systematically disenfranchised. As Egnal writes, they "suffered because Republicans never considered protecting black rights to be as important as assisting the business community." Insisting that economic differences principally led to the emergence of two hostile, uncompromising camps, Egnal gives no comfort to the mythmakers. This one's sure to provoke discussion.