

The rivers ran backward: the civil war and the remaking of the American middle border

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Abstrak

Most Americans believe that the Ohio River was a clearly defined and static demographic and political boundary between freedom and slavery, indeed between North and South, an extension of the Mason-Dixon Line and a border that produced the war. None of this is true, except perhaps the outcome of war. But the centrality of the Civil War and its outcome in the making of these tropes is undeniable. This interpretation leaves no room for the third of the nations major nineteenth-century regions: the West. Ironically, the wars central figure, Abraham Lincoln, was a lifelong resident of this regions middle border-the slave states of Kentucky and Missouri and of the free states of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Kansas-lying astride not one but two fault lines of that war, east and west and north and south. The Rivers Ran Backward contests the assumption that regional identities throughout these states were stable in the era of the civil war. Across the middle border, the war left an indelible imprint on the way in which residents thought of themselves and other Americans, proving as much a shaper as a product of regional identities. The book explains how the Civil War and its aftermath transformed a regional political culture into the cultural politics of region, creating perhaps the wars greatest irony: that the victorious North created a larger, more enduring South than the defeated Confederacy could accomplish for itself, and that former western neighbors created a border between them after the fact.