

## BOOK REVIEW

*William Wells and the Struggle for the Old Northwest.* By William Heath. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. xviii + 500 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.)

In *William Wells and the Struggle for the Old Northwest*, William Heath provides a contextual biography of a man who left an uneven documentary trail and was rarely the most important person in the room. A child of settlers in Kentucky, Wells was captured by Indians in 1784 and adopted into a prominent Miami family. As a young man he fought against expansionist Americans in the Ohio Valley until “switching sides” in 1792, serving as a scout and spy for the Americans. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, Wells had become a translator and Indian agent for the federal government, frequently embroiled in controversy, often resulting from his own machinations. He died in the American retreat from Fort Dearborn in 1812.

Most scholars of the Old Northwest are familiar with Wells, yet Heath believes his subject “deserves to be much better known” (p. 401). It is nearly impossible to write a modern rendering of American expansionism or Indian resistance to it without incorporating Wells, yet only a few efforts—and none recently—have attempted to reconstruct his life. This book is the best accounting of Wells’s life available to scholars. Heath

impressively pieces together evidence from nineteen archives, the abundant published primary sources, and scholarly treatments. In part because of this fragmentary record, Heath contextualizes events to illustrate the larger issues shaping the world of Wells; this is suggested by the title. Unfortunately, Wells often disappears from the narrative for pages at a time, sometimes reappearing simply because we know he was a translator at a particular event.

Heath has a PhD in American studies and is best known for his praiseworthy historical fiction. Perhaps consequently, the book is strong in narrative but lacks new interpretive insights for scholars familiar with the Old Northwest. More problematic is that Heath does not fully account for some basic problems important to the larger contextualization he constructs. Perhaps none is more important than answering why Wells “switched sides.” Heath initially explains that Wells did it to “free his own [imprisoned] family” and later suggests Wells wanted “a more secure life” and “the old [Indian] ways could not last” (pp. 153, 250). In the end, Heath never provides a straightforward interpretive rationale.

Heath also has a penchant for simplification. Although he sees Wells as a complex character, he seeks to portray him as a “hero” in a world with a “clash” between “two worlds in mortal conflict with each other” (p. xi).

The reductive undertones tend to detract from the complexity he might otherwise tease out, especially when conveying Indian politics and the motives of go-betweens like Wells.

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