Book Review: David Grimsted's American Mobbing

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In *American Mobbing*, author David Grimsted takes a broad look at communal violence in the period prior to the Civil War, and compares Northern and Southern era mob activity. He argues that at the heart of these twelve-hundred-plus mobs was slavery, and that these conflicts were part of the accepted political process. The first in a two-part series and product of twenty-seven years of research, *American Mobbing* received generally favorable reviews in the *Journal of American History*, *The American Historical Review*, and the Journal of the Early Republic. The author received his PhD from the University of California at Berkley, and has written two other social histories of the same period, as well as co-authored a textbook on American History. David Grimsted is currently Professor of History at the University of Maryland.

American Mobbing opens with a focus on the North, and the partisan politics surrounding Andrew Jackson’s presidency. Grimsted finds that Northern Whigs supported abolition speakers, and by and large, Democrats were the rioters. Jackson, though personally exhibiting vigilante behavior, condemned the rule of “mob law,” and three times sent troops to stop riots. There were riots against banks, mail fraud, and Catholics, but these merely foreshadow the violent wave which began in 1835 with the abolition movement’s mail campaign. The postal enterprise ignited Southern outrage and widespread Northern opposition. There was both rioting against abolitionists and those for fugitive slaves. Southern press began literally calling for the heads of the abolitionists, and Northerners took offense at the breach in free speech. Thereafter, Grimsted argues, two separate patterns emerged in the increasingly contentious sections. He proposes that the differences consisted of “the distinction between property and person as focus of attack, the number of deaths, the situation of those who died in riot, the actions of officials, and the differing quotients of sadism” (13). While Northern racism was strong, as evidenced by the race riots, Yankees were also as likely to view Southern fanaticism as appalling as the anarchist views in the abolitionist camps (30). Press stories about the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law caused many to reevaluate their politics. Thereafter, Democrats in free states became increasingly conscious that they were defending a losing cause, while many in the South escalated the amount of violent deaths.

The heart of the author’s work focuses on this Southern violence, and how it both derived from slavery and steered Northern sentiment towards war. While the number of incidents and deaths are nearly equal in both sections of the country, deaths in the South were the objective, and mobs were often led by public officials; property damage was the objective in the North, where deaths were often the result of police action. Grimsted correctly states that “Public murder and intimidation took on added vigor
from a society where status and character were tied to mastery, to the numbers of people over whom one wielded unquestioned domination” (98). While violence was not condoned by all south of the Mason-Dixon, many executions were witnessed in this “Southern spectator sport” (Over two-thousand were present for a public burning of a freedman convicted of murder in St. Louis) (95). The author convincingly argues that “mob activity, like personal violence, was less an attack on legality than an alternative system of securing justice...honest was the argument that mobs avoided the law’s delays and circumvented the monetary influences within it...there was far less equal justice under the law than justice for sale” (110). Surprisingly, of the three types of mobs which Grimsted describes, the anti-abolition mobs were the least violent, while mobs intent on punishing criminals (such as gamblers or counterfeitors) were highly effective in gaining execution, and were often unopposed by lawmen. This power in numbers was also successful in squelching any opposition voice, a third type of mob that the author terms “scare mobs.” He chronicles the struggle of both black and white opposition to the violence, and describes how each was silenced. “The murder of the helpless proved proslavery power and rightness...the burned bodies paid silent testimony to God’s sanction of the human sacrifice gleefully offered” (177).

The final section focuses on political rioting. “Cities were the centers of greatest violence and corruption, but in all sections, American antebellum politics was a tough and professional profit-making sport” (198). From Philadelphia to St. Louis, from Charleston to New Orleans, elections were commonly “a hell’s holiday of drunkenness and perjury and bludgeons” (198). The introduction of the “Know-Nothing” Party further muddied the waters, and triggered even more violence with its anti-immigrant stance, and the threat of further division in the South. The culmination of the sectional mob systems and politics was “bloody Kansas,” where they would “meet, mingle, and mangle” (246). “The importance of Kansas lay less in its bloodshed than in its political reverberations, as the country became divided on a sectional basis between controlling parties” at odds over slavery (247). In this western arena, Southern interests would sacrifice all other rights to promote slavery, while Northerners increasingly condemned of both the South and the Democratic Party.

*American Mobbing* is the result of much research and is a valuable tool in understanding the American political violence that led towards Civil War. T.C. Buchanan states in his review that “while Grimsted’s research is magnificent, his awkward presentation diminishes the power of his book... he is remarkably erudite on every page, but the sum of his insights is not as meaningful as its parts.”1 The major themes are often lost as he details the multitude of riots throughout. Though the book is divided into three sections, his organization is weak, neither following a chronological nor

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a thematic order. Perhaps his greatest failure is to provide easy access to his quantification, hence forcing you to accept his analysis without seeing the results. He also takes a decidedly pro-Northern stance, condemning Southern violence, while concurrently condoning violence as a necessary evil as long as it is perpetuated by an abolitionist, who supported the “proper moral cause” (128). In spite of his interpretive failures, this social history by Grimsted poses many questions about the causes of personal violence and how that is tied to many sectional crises and the Civil War.

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