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# Review Of "The Philadelphia Nativist Riots: Irish Kensington Erupts" By K. W. Milano

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Philadelphia Nativist Riots: Irish Kensington Erupts* by Kenneth W. Milano

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off a vociferous debate about the meanings of slavery and freedom in South Central Pennsylvania. The collapse of the Liberty, Free Soil, and Know-Nothing Parties set the stage for Democratic and Republican contestation on the issue. Meanwhile, shifts in the political atmosphere led to a petition campaign to repeal Pennsylvania's personal liberty laws.

During the Civil War, South Central Pennsylvania became ground zero for the conflict over the meanings of slavery and freedom. Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania, which culminated in the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, had calamitous impacts on the black community. The Confederate army rounded up African Americans and sent them South. In the postbellum period, the decimated antebellum black population was replaced largely with Southern migrants, who experienced racism, discrimination, and, in 1869, an attempted lynching.

David Smith's *On the Edge of Freedom* is an important addition to the literature on antislavery in the North. By linking the antebellum and postbellum trajectories of slavery and freedom, readers can understand and appreciate the complexity of antislavery sentiment in a border region influenced by starkly opposed ideologies. South Central Pennsylvania proved neither a beacon of hope nor a bastion of freedom. Instead, it reflected and refracted the nation's uneasy and unfinished sensibilities on issues of race in the antebellum and postbellum years, residues of which are still felt in the present day.

*Alcorn State University*

STEPHEN G. HALL

*The Philadelphia Nativist Riots: Irish Kensington Erupts.* By KENNETH W. MILANO. (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013. 160 pp. Illustrations, appendix, bibliography, index. Paper, \$19.99.)

Kenneth W. Milano has written a local history of the Third Ward, West Kensington neighborhood (St. Michael Parish) that became the site for three days of violent clashes between nativist rioters and Irish Catholic residents in May 1844. Milano, a lifetime resident and local historian of Kensington, dedicates the book to "those Irish Catholics, known and unknown, who gave their lives for their religion" during the riots, so that "their memory will never be forgotten" (5). The book is written for readers with an interest in a street-by-street, residence-by-residence study of this neighborhood. There's much to be gained from an in-depth look at this small area (about four square blocks) where nearly all the fighting, shooting, and arson occurred during the May riots. Yet at times, this is local history with an antiquarian flavor. Readers are unlikely to acquire a greater understanding of the interrelationship of this enclave of Irish immigrant weavers to long-term developments in Philadelphia's history, but they will discover the dimensions of the Master Street School and learn that it had "detached unheated

toilets,” that a Colonel Rambo was hired as clerk of the Nanny Goat Market (which was open most days until 3:00 p.m.), and that the sister of nativist martyr George Shiffler afterward lived in Kensington with her uncle (36).

Most of the book is devoted to a meticulous retelling of the roughly seventy-two hours of violent skirmishes that took place within the blocks surrounding the market, the school, and St. Michael’s church and convent. Milano builds his narrative on newspaper accounts and the trial evidence. The book includes no footnotes, so future scholars cannot trace any of the details of his very specific reconstruction of this period of urban warfare. One of Milano’s original contributions is his claim that the violence between nativists and Irish Catholics was mostly the work of a relatively small group of about seventy-five well-armed fighters on each side. The thousands of nativists who gathered in Center City for rallies and who marched en masse to Kensington generally kept out of the fray, cordoning off the neighborhood and beating up occasional Irish residents who fled into their grasp.

By focusing his attention exclusively on the May riots in Kensington, Milano only tells one half of the history of Philadelphia’s nativist violence in 1844, bypassing the riots that rocked the Southwark district in July. Although his design was to write a neighborhood history, his intensely local focus on Kensington draws no comparisons between the violence in that district and the rioting that took place only a few months later. The riots were both a citywide conflict and a neighborhood-specific fight. Three of the eight nativists killed—and many of the wounded—in the Kensington riots lived in Southwark. This volume reminds us that a long-forgotten section of Kensington was once the site for a clash between religious bigotry and immigrant self-preservation, but it is unlikely to supplant any of the existing scholarly literature on nativism and Philadelphia’s riots.

*Swarthmore College*

BRUCE DORSEY

*Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery.* By R. J. M. BLACKETT. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 136 pp. Notes, index. \$27.95.)

Richard Blackett has spent a decade gathering and analyzing newspaper accounts, fugitive slave advertisements, personal narratives, and other sources associated with the Underground Railroad, accumulating a massive database of information along the way. Shorter essays and presentations have appeared during that time, but this volume represents his efforts at providing a larger synthesis of his research. *Making Freedom* is a result of a series of talks Blackett gave for the Steven and Janice Brose Lectures in the Civil War Era at Penn State University. His goal is to illustrate how the actions of escaping slaves and their helpers not