

*Political Moderation America's First Two Centuries*, by Robert McCluer Calhoun.  
Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Robert M. Calhoun has dedicated his career to refashioning his fellow practitioners' understanding of ideologies in early American history.<sup>1</sup> One of Calhoun's most recent additions and perhaps, most compelling of his theses concerns the power and genesis of moderation as a derivative of cultural interactions within America's backcountry. Calhoun's contributions in both *Political Moderation in America's First Two Centuries* (Cambridge, 2008) and "Scotch-Irish Calvinists in Conflict" in the Fall 2004 edition of *The Journal of Scotch-Irish Studies* reflect his keen ability to flesh out the interplay among politics, religion, and popular culture(s) and thereby exemplify their varied influence on American ideological formations during the colonial, revolutionary, and early national periods.<sup>2</sup> Given the depth of his previous and insightful research on the conservative strains within early American political culture, his latest work on moderation as the progeny of religious, political, and cultural conflict as well as convergence appears as nothing less than an extension of path-breaking research into early American life and culture.

One of the vignettes to which Calhoun attaches extraordinary significance in the origins and functionings of political moderation as part and parcel of America's early frontier expansions occurred in Due West Corner, South Carolina from the mid-1830s through the 1850s. Due West presented the perfect setting to observe a once-peaceable religious diversity bleeding into political events as practitioners began pursuing, unapologetically, the social implications of their faith.<sup>3</sup> This was particularly pertinent to South Carolinians, fresh from the defeat of nullification, who became increasingly aware that slavery and westward expansion would continue to entangle each other, dominating national politics for the foreseeable future; Calhoun, however, keeps his readers' attention on the local characters within his story for two main reasons: first, he rejects the popular view of America's early frontier as static or somewhat unimportant when compared to the late nineteenth century, trans-Mississippi West. Second, Calhoun desires to show readers that the frontier setting in South Carolina has much to contribute

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<sup>1</sup> See Calhoun's *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973); *Revolutionary America: An Interpretive Overview* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976); *Evangelicals and Conservatives in the Early South, 1740-1861* (University of South Carolina Press, 1988); *The Loyalist Perception and Other Essays* (University of South Carolina Press, 1989); *Dominion and Liberty: Ideology in the Anglo-American World, 1660-1801* (Harlan Davidson, 1994); and most recently, *Political Moderation in America's First Two Centuries* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> This review article concentrates its focus on Calhoun's chapter "Moderating Moderation" found in *Political Moderation in America's First Two Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 226-240 and "Scotch-Irish Calvinists in Conflict: The South Carolina Slave Literacy Controversy, 1834-1860" in *The Journal of Scotch-Irish Studies* 2.1. (Fall 2004), 64-88.

<sup>3</sup> Two excellent books that examine migration to frontier South Carolina with Calhoun-like attention to the dynamics of social, cultural, political, and religious exchanges are Arlin C. Migliazzo, *To Make This Land Our Own: Community, Identity, and Cultural Adaptation in Purrysburg Township, South Carolina, 1732-1865* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007) and Bertrand Van Ruymbeke, *From New Babylon to Eden: The Huguenots and Their Migration to Colonial South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006).

to how we envision social order in the antebellum South. For example, his investigation reveals that southerners, only a decade shy of the Civil War, embraced *numerous sides* of the national debate on slavery. This supposition alone will serve to shake up the stilted categories of some southern historians.

Calhoun's story begins in the 1830s as the state legislature released its *Resolutions*, a reaction to the state's failed attempt at nullification that "increased penalties and tightened enforcement of the law that forbade teaching slaves to read." (*Journal of Scotch-Irish Studies*, 64—see footnote two). Calhoun marks the arrival of these regulations within the Abbeville district and makes note of the local magistrate's acute awareness of the impact this legislation would have on congregants of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP) in Due West. For, as Calhoun suggests, the pro-slavery forces within South Carolina's government were ferreting out all opponents, including Due West's Scotch-Irish Calvinists, as a "potential breach in the South Carolina wall of white hegemony." (64) Calhoun's contextualization of this initial situation is crucial for non-specialists. The ARP congregation, led by William Hemphill, comprised residents of the town's total 750 inhabitants who had moved from Ulster to Pennsylvania in the 1790s and then to South Carolina in the 1820s. This branch of believers upheld a commitment to "pure Scottish Calvinism" that seemingly produced a complicated set of emotions toward the institution of slavery that arose upon their South Carolina migration. (65) For many of the ARP members within the Abbeville and Chester Districts, protesting the *Resolutions* was necessitated by a Calvinist faith centered on daily devotionals within the individualized family unit that included slaves. *Resolutions* petitions from these frontier districts conveyed a strong opposition to the state's attempt to centralize power by calling on "the rights of conscience" and "peace and safety" clauses within state's constitution. (66) With this attempt to thwart the solidifying of pro-slavery rule, these transplanted evangelicals found themselves at odds with the state's growing white power structure.

Calhoun shows the conflict did not fully unfold until 1850, twelve years later, when Due West resident and ARP member Robert Grier hired out his slave George to Lemuel Reid of the nearby Long Cane community. While George Grier was on Reid's farm, he spoke confidently with Reid's slaves of a future of physical and spiritual freedom that reflected the ARP's stance on familial, spiritual instruction and probably Robert Grier's own anxiety concerning the institution of slavery. Reid, a member of the politically influential Long Cane Presbyterian Church, was highly displeased and sought legal redress, claiming that Grier's preaching offended all of Long Cane's white residents. The uproar produced by this episode allowed Calhoun to draw several conclusions concerning law, race and religion in the American backcountry.

Calhoun guides readers through the intricacies of Calvinist theological frameworks while concurrently weighing the evolutionary interactions between immigration, the political implications of the Scottish Enlightenment, and the variations held within Scottish Calvinism.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, these interactions contributed to the development of a new sort of American ideological framework, namely

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4 Although more concerned with the cultural expressions within and spawned by American revivalism, Leigh Eric Schmidt's work, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) is quite complimentary to Calhoun's valuation of cultural, political, religious interplay.

constitutionalism, and would have profound impact upon religion and politics from the 1760s through the Second Great Awakening. The resultant strands of moderation that Calhoun discovers within Scotch-Irish settlements in the backcountry give us exactly what he intended: a scholarly exploration that “brings historic moderate Calvinist principles out of cultural shadows and into the light of human understanding.” (86)

Yet, one wonders if moderation, with its often disturbing repercussions, can be wholly fastened to the religious commitments that Calhoun cites. Perhaps the religious openness of the backcountry did predispose Calvinists to advocate for slave literacy and thus present a less virulent defense of the slave system, but what of economics? Could not the intricacies of local political economies equally, or at least partially, play into these “un-Southern” positions particularly for the 1850s? If Robert Grier was willing to boldly declare the future freedom of his own slaves, he may have been convinced that unfree labor was nonviable for an economy facing new, uncertain capitalist transitions. Equally, his position as a college president might have decreased his financial dependence on slavery thus granting him the liberty to preach of slavery’s demise. At the very same time, Grier could have believed that limiting slaves’ literacy threw up unrighteous barriers signifying the immorality inherent in the legal mechanisms of slave societies. Such positions were not mutually exclusive and could have both impacted Grier’s theological proclamations. This point is more than Calhoun appears willing to concede.

The development in the 1820s/30s of border districts in the backcountry South where the infant Whig party held sway among businessmen in swelling towns and villages supports such a hypothesis. In places like Tuscaloosa, Alabama (wedged between the yeomen of northern Alabama and the cotton planters southward) settlers witnessed the rise of a strong, predominantly merchant-based Whig element less committed to slavery than many of their fellow southerners. Religion also influenced these Whigs. The Catholic Church as well as several Protestant churches including Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Baptist and Methodist congregations met in early Tuscaloosa and influenced local cultural politics. In frontier Tuscaloosa, politics, religion *and* economics more clearly blended as individuals weighed each of these highly personal and communal aspects of their lives in support of the institution of slavery. Again, one cannot help but wonder if similar intersections occurred for Presbyterians in the backcountry of South Carolina.

Calhoun’s larger findings within his *Political Moderation in American’s First Two Centuries* will stimulate scholars of early America and its Atlantic connections and the American backcountry. Calhoun’s project is, as Eugene D. Genovese blurbed: “illuminating history...imperative for an understanding of our own tortured times.” Calhoun’s impressive research allows professional and lay historians of the frontier South to be unhinged from a strikingly persistent notion; namely, that the pre-Civil War South’s status as slave society inescapably produced a pro-slavery economic and political order that permeated all levels of society and captured the devotion of all southern whites. Even though scholars like Genovese might disagree, the provocative nature of Calhoun’s work rests in its ability to subtly challenge this idea of total hegemony by demonstrating how religious diversity in the backcountry impacted the debate over southern slavery *within* the South. Thus, even as many dissenters on slavery were not fully-fledged abolitionists, as Calhoun notes, the sheer fact that some individuals in 1830s/50s South Carolina publicly denounced the peculiar institution based on community-held religious

convictions expands our historic imagining of interactions between anti- and pro-slavery ideologues.<sup>5</sup>

Calhoun's moderation thesis presses historians of the antebellum South to acknowledge that a fuller perception of both regional and national history results from due attention to the region's backcountry. Equally, the power of local political history and the history of religion both receive strong vindication within Calhoun's persuasive work. The precarious professional politics involved in writing about America's frontier present adversities that have undoubtedly discouraged countless historians from considering the backcountry's formative influences upon American political ideology. Despite these hurdles, Calhoun's findings on moderation testify to his ability to meet these challenges while simultaneously reforming the questions we should ask when exploring the connections between place, politics, and religion in the early republic.

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<sup>5</sup> For the most recent and compelling examination of the slaveholders' intellectual design for shaping the South's collective worldview see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Slavery in Black and White: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders' New World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).