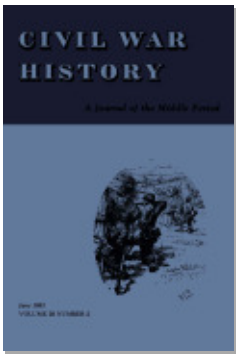
# *Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832* , and: *The Rhetoric of Conservatism: The Virginia Convention of 1829-30 and the Conservative Tradition in the South* (review)

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masons were eventually victims of their success, for their Masonic enemies declined in numbers during the 1830s and 1840s.

Vaughan's monograph exhibits both the strengths and weaknesses of traditional political history. Proceeding with the rise, decline, and fall of the party state by state (with an interruption for the Antimasons presidential campaign in 1832), he offers a from-the-top down, event-filled description of the party's leaders, conventions, election results, and legislative efforts. As even the most begrudging opponent of the new political history will acknowledge, parties and politics are more than this. Vaughan, however, has made no use of techniques developed in the last two decades. Sometimes this leads to questionable conclusions. For example, he compares two elections in Massachusetts, and assuming a standing decision on the part of Whig and Democratic voters, awards the Antimasonic vote to the latter, whose numbers had increased.

This then is old-school political history with all its virtues and sins. Vaughan has read widely in the manuscript literature; he has researched carefully, and he answers fulsomely the question, what happened? But because he is so preoccupied with events, *The Antimasonic Party in the United States* lacks any governing interpretation or synthesis that would expand our understanding of American political behavior.

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*Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831–1832.* By Alison Goodyear Freehling. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982. Pp. xiv, 306. $30.00.)

*The Rhetoric of Conservatism: The Virginia Convention of 1829–30 and the Conservative Tradition in the South.* By Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1982. Pp. ix, 218. $18.00.)

Alison Freehling's *Drift Toward Dissolution* is the first major study of the Virginia slavery debate of 1831–32 since Joseph C. Robert's *The Road From Monticello*, published some forty years ago. The book is aggressively revisionist in tone and argument. Freehling's target is a "traditional" interpretation of antebellum Virginia that she associates most often with the work of Robert and Charles H. Ambler. While her focus is the legislative debate on slavery, she examines the broader context of geographical and political conflict in Virginia from the early nineteenth century through the division of the state during the Civil War. There are extended discussions of the constitutional convention of 1829–30, the Turner rebellion, efforts to colonize Virginia's free blacks in the 1830s, and the final phase of the commonwealth's "drift toward dissolution" in the 1850s and early 1860s.

Freehling's revisionist argument has several threads but can be summarized quickly. Historians have grossly misread the meaning and signi-

ficance of the 1831–32 debate. Since a consensus existed among the delegates that Virginia should and would become a free-soil state, none advocated "perpetual slavery" for the commonwealth or defended slavery in unambiguously positive terms. The two opposing sides—"abolitionists" and "conservatives"—clashed over means, not ends. Conservatives opposed legislative, *postnati* emancipation as both unjust and impractical but nonetheless anticipated an eventual end to slavery in Virginia through the natural means of a domestic slave trade that would carry off the state's blacks to the cotton-growing region of the deep South and Southwest. Virtually all Virginians, Freehling suggests, saw their state's future to lie ultimately with the neighboring free-soil states to the north, and she cites Thomas Roderick Dew, author of the famous *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature* (1832), to clinch her case. The legislature rejected both immediate emancipation and perpetual slavery, adopting instead a compromise resolution that openly proclaimed slavery an evil and committed the state to future abolition. Thus contemporaries generally (and correctly) perceived the debate as more a victory of abolitionists than of eastern conservatives. Rather than marking a repudiation of Jeffersonian liberalism, it "dramatized slavery's tenuous status" (p. 167) in Virginia and represented a potentially momentous step toward the fulfillment of Jefferson's dream of gradual emancipation. What halted this antislavery momentum, according to Freehling, was the subsequent failure of colonization, which can be traced primarily to the refusal of Virginia's free blacks to participate. Nevertheless, Virginia remained long after 1832 a profoundly divided state in which debate over slavery had both a geographical and a class dimension. The commonwealth never became, in short, the "closed," proslavery monolith depicted in "traditional" interpretations.

Here as in so many revisionist monographs the argument appears to have been carried somewhat beyond its defensible limits. Freehling's challenge of conventional wisdom is not without merit, but in her effort to sustain and emphasize that challenge she makes any number of debatable judgments and generalizations. Readers of Dew's *Review* may well question, for example, her assertion that he "adopted an apologetic, ambivalent tone" (p. 204) when defending slavery, as well as her contention that his support for state internal improvements (which she ties to his vision of a future, free-soil Virginia) was "central" to the essay (pp. 202–3). Freehling's book is important and stimulating, and I do not mean to belittle its contribution; but the approach strikes me as excessively tendentious and the evidence rather more complex (and ambiguous) than the analysis often suggests. The book is also weakened, in my judgment, by the fact that it is clumsily written and poorly edited.

Dickson Bruce's *The Rhetoric of Conservatism* offers an altogether different approach to understanding conflict in early nineteenth-century Virginia. Focusing on the conservative faction at the constitutional convention of 1829–30, Bruce analyzes political rhetoric and

ideology as reflections of a powerful strain of cultural conservatism in the state. Through an analysis of voting at the convention Bruce first identifies two solid blocs of delegates—one "conservative" and one "reform"—as well as a group of nine "moderates" whom the conservatives had to win over on the crucial issues. Bruce essays to explain precisely how the conservatives made their appeal to these moderates and why they succeeded. In so doing he downplays the significance of the slavery issue or any other specific appeal to "interest." The conservatives, he argues, attacked reform arguments with a resonant rhetoric that dramatized "the weakness of human achievements and the vulnerability of man to time and nature" (p. 99). Equating democracy with the frightening specter of disorder and exuding pessimism about human nature and the potential for social improvement, the conservatives strove to evoke among moderate delegates a compelling fear of change. They also appealed successfully to a nostalgic vision of gentlemanly leadership in a homogeneous community.

Bruce's elaborate analysis of conservative rhetoric reflects his general interest in "questions of how political language and political beliefs work and of how one can understand their meaning" (p. vii). Much of his discussion of political culture in early nineteenth-century Virginia is interesting (especially, I think, in his final chapter, where he sketches in very broad strokes the enduring legacy of this cultural conservatism in the South), but much of it is also simply too general—and sometimes too obvious—to advance very far our understanding of the specific case at hand. His analysis of ideology does not cut very deep; as intellectual history it is superficial. Although he effectively dramatizes the significance of many conservative concerns, his analysis often merely skims the surface. He indicates clearly, for instance, that "sincerity" was a vital concept in conservative political culture but fails to explore its rich meaning. Given the book's rather narrow focus and range of analysis, readers may have cause to question its length.

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*The Cormany Diaries, A Northern Family in the Civil War.* Edited by James C. Mohr. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982. Pp. xix, 597. $29.95.)

The year 1976 had much to offer to museums, journalists, and historians. Encouraged by the bicentennial celebration, Americans in considerable numbers dusted off private family documents and brought them to public attention. Few among these documents can surpass in value to students of the Civil War era those presented by a descendent of Samuel and Rachel Cormany to John C. Mohr, professor of History at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. The Cormanys, who met at Ohio's Otterbein College in 1858 and married in 1860, had much in