

# INTRODUCTION

## MAKING MEN AND MAKING VIOLENCE



**T**ravelers, especially those from Europe, who visited the Trans-Appalachian West in the early nineteenth century were fascinated by the willingness of the men they met in the region to resort to interpersonal violence to resolve their disputes. The British traveler Fortescue Cuming observed that “they fight for the most trifling provocations, or even sometimes without any, but merely to try each others’ prowess, which they are fond of vaunting of.” The writer James Hall similarly concluded that “we read marvellous stories of the ferocity of western men. The name of Kentuckian is continually associated with the idea of fighting, dirking, and gouging.” The image of the violent and intensely independent frontiersman has become a trope of American history and culture. In this book I argue that this image developed—and was also consciously constructed—because of an array of different circumstances and conditions in the early Trans-Appalachian West during the second half of the eighteenth century. Whereas men living on the western fringes of settlement in the early eighteenth century may have been viewed as uncouth and disorderly, they were not at that time viewed as inherently violent. Not only did frontiersmen later become connected to images of violence, they also became inextricably linked to guns, with the development in the late eighteenth century of what may be termed a “gun culture.”

Most modern scholars broadly agree that violence of numerous kinds seems to have been inherent to the culture and identity of the West—and more important, to white western men—by the early nineteenth century. Randy Roth, in particular, has demonstrated that in parts of the Trans-Appalachian West, people were far more violent than in other parts of the United States. He has calculated that in the decades following the American Revolution a homicide rate of 25–30 per 100,000 adults was not untypical in the southern and western backcountry. In some places, the rate even reached 200 or more per 100,000. In comparison, homicide rates in New England in the early nineteenth century ranged from under 1 to just over 6 per 100,000 adults.<sup>2</sup>

In this book I go beyond a simple discussion of whether the early West was or was not violent to examine the structures and culture that created this violence. The explanation for such violence is often rooted in the ethnic origins of the region's population. Many residents could trace their heritage to the province of Ulster in northern Ireland, and the popular belief holds that Ulstermen—or, as they have become known in North America, the Scots-Irish—were and are inherently violent. In his discussion of contemporary Appalachia, *Hillbilly Elegy*, commentator turned politician J. D. Vance has argued simply, “that’s what Scots-Irish Appalachians do.” The perception that violence is a feature of Scots-Irish culture has been pervasive in American popular culture and also in many academic studies. For instance, one scholar, David Hackett Fischer, has even argued that conditions in what he terms the “British borderlands” provided perfect opportunities for the inhabitants “to rob and rape and murder with impunity.” However, such descriptions do not fit well with the realities of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ireland and Scotland. For scholars of the British Isles, it is much more difficult to explain the violence of many of these settlers simply by their cultural heritage.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than looking at the cultural heritage of the Scots-Irish and other migrants to the early backcountry in Europe, in this book I argue that it is more important to look at the experiences of these migrants once in North America. The Scots-Irish disproportionately settled in the western regions, and colonial administrators from the 1730s onward consciously sought to use them as a bulwark against the French. Much more than their cultural baggage from Europe, their experience in the West shaped this society. The aim here is to examine how the experiences of backcountry men—establishing

farms in the West and waging war against Indigenous peoples—shaped and developed a culture that placed great emphasis on violence as a means of demonstrating manhood and status. It was not the cultural heritage of the migrants that generated violence among white men but, rather, conflicts over authority and the meanings of manhood.<sup>4</sup>

In this book I reconceptualize various intellectual, geographic, and chronological conceptions of the early West in order to understand the causes and nature of violence. The concept of a “frontier” is central to this conceptualization. Historians have seen the term “frontier” as problematic. It seems to suggest a line or a boundary, and indeed this is how the nineteenth-century historian Frederick Jackson Turner thought of the frontier—as the western extent of settlement, a line that could be drawn upon a map and that had ceased to exist by 1890. For many decades historians have rejected this concept. The term “frontier” has had its most important utility as a particular process of cultural change rather than as a geographic line or region, and some historians now argue for its restoration as a valuable term. Patrick Spero has perhaps most strongly argued for its rehabilitation, examining its contemporary usage. Spero argues that a frontier “was a zone that people considered vulnerable to invasion, one that was created when colonists feared an onslaught from imperial rivals and other enemies.” Consequently, Spero’s frontiers were fundamentally different from Turner’s in that they “were not areas of active expansion, exploration, and economic opportunity; they were contingent (a clear enemy threat created such zones), defensive (threatened areas required fortifications to ward off an assault), and prone to contraction.” The frontier in this book is precisely such an area. The frontier was a region under constant threat, whose boundaries fluctuated, sometimes expanding, other times contracting. This fundamentally shaped the culture of those migrants who lived there.<sup>5</sup>

To understand the nature of the frontier, it is also necessary to reconceptualize the frontier conflicts of this period. The struggles on the Trans-Appalachian frontier in this period should not be seen as a series of distinct and disparate wars with many of their roots elsewhere (such as the Seven Years’ War, Pontiac’s War, or the Revolutionary War) but as one single conflict, the Forty Years’ War, with its roots firmly in the region. Although it might be problematic, in this book I use the term “French and Indian War,” rather than “Seven Years’ War,” quite deliberately to describe the first phases of the Forty Years’ War, emphasizing that in most ways this was a local struggle.

Although it formed part of a much broader imperial war, the possession of territories in Europe, India, or Africa did not concern the Indigenous or Euro-American inhabitants of the early West. The Indigenous inhabitants of the region participated in one single struggle to maintain control of and defend their homelands from incoming Euro-American invaders.<sup>6</sup>

This was a struggle for land upon which Native people had lived for generations but that incoming Euro-Americans now saw as their birthright. Historians used to call these invading men and their families “pioneers,” conjuring up images of brave hardy souls taming the savage and empty wilderness. More recently, historians have used the term “settler,” a term frequently used in the eighteenth century. However, both these terms overlook the fact that the individuals moving into the West were not moving into an empty wilderness; they were moving onto land already inhabited by Indigenous farmers. The West had already been settled. In this book I follow Rob Harper’s suggestion and call these migrants “colonists,” for they were establishing colonies of Euro-Americans in the West in much the same manner that Europeans established colonies in the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and they consciously sought to remove or extirpate the Native people who had themselves settled these lands.<sup>7</sup>

The process of westward expansion led to intense violence because these colonists were removing and unsettling the Indigenous peoples. As white men pushed west in search of fertile lands, the Indigenous inhabitants of those lands, not surprisingly, resisted bitterly. In the decades following 1754, the western frontier was a scene of almost constant warfare as colonists and Native people struggled for control of the upper Ohio Valley and Great Lakes region.<sup>8</sup> The ferocity and extent of the Forty Years’ War shaped the region’s culture not only in its direct impact but also in the ways in which the struggle was commemorated and memorialized. More than anything else, the Forty Years’ War served to shape the image of heroic western men wielding their guns in defense of their families and farms.

The reality of the war was very different, however. It raised troubling questions about the ability of men to provide defense and make rational choices for their families. The threat of violence, if not the actuality of violence, was constant. Between Braddock’s defeat in 1755 and the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, there were few times when colonists could feel safe or secure in their homes. Men were constantly required to be on their guard to protect their families. Contemporaries were aware that this was a protracted

conflict. The Kentucky colonist Septimus Schull, for instance, was quite adamant that “the Revolutionary War in the Western Country, did not close before the year of Wayne’s Treaty” (the Treaty of Greenville) in 1795.<sup>9</sup> No other region in North America witnessed such a prolonged and intense period of violence. This extended period of violence fundamentally shaped the region’s culture and, in particular, the nature of manhood in the West. Warfare posed new challenges and created an alternative avenue for men to prove their claims to manhood. For poorer men who could not claim manhood through landownership, displays of bravery were an even surer way to buttress their claims to manhood. That there was so much opportunity for men to do this created a culture in which many men sought to display bravery through acts of violence, initially against their Native adversaries but later against other white men.<sup>10</sup>

There is also a broader geographical perspective in this book. Many studies have focused on a colony or a state, and others have examined a “region” such as the Ohio Valley or the Chesapeake. At first sight, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio, the principal focus of this study, seem to be four rather disparate states, socially, culturally, and politically (see figure I.1). However, many modern studies would now consider this region part of northern Appalachia. For eighteenth-century migrants, such distinctions between states and colonies were even less apparent. Indeed, there was a substantial and constant migration from Pennsylvania down the Great Valley and into Virginia, then across the Appalachians at the Cumberland Gap, into Kentucky, and ultimately into Ohio. For early colonists, state boundaries were largely invisible, and indeed in many instances they were largely indeterminate. Kentucky and the Northwest Territories were at one time part of Virginia, which even attempted to claim authority over what is now southwestern Pennsylvania as well as over the region north of the Ohio River. Even international boundaries were largely invisible. Many leading Ohioans were also involved in the settlement and development of Upper Canada, and most colonists in Upper Canada came from New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.<sup>11</sup>

Controlling the land required extending government authority and institutions into the West. Contests about the nature and legitimacy of authority in the West were fundamental to shaping constructions of manhood. For many scholars, the weakness of institutions in the new United States and the instability of government were essential in shaping and creating a culture

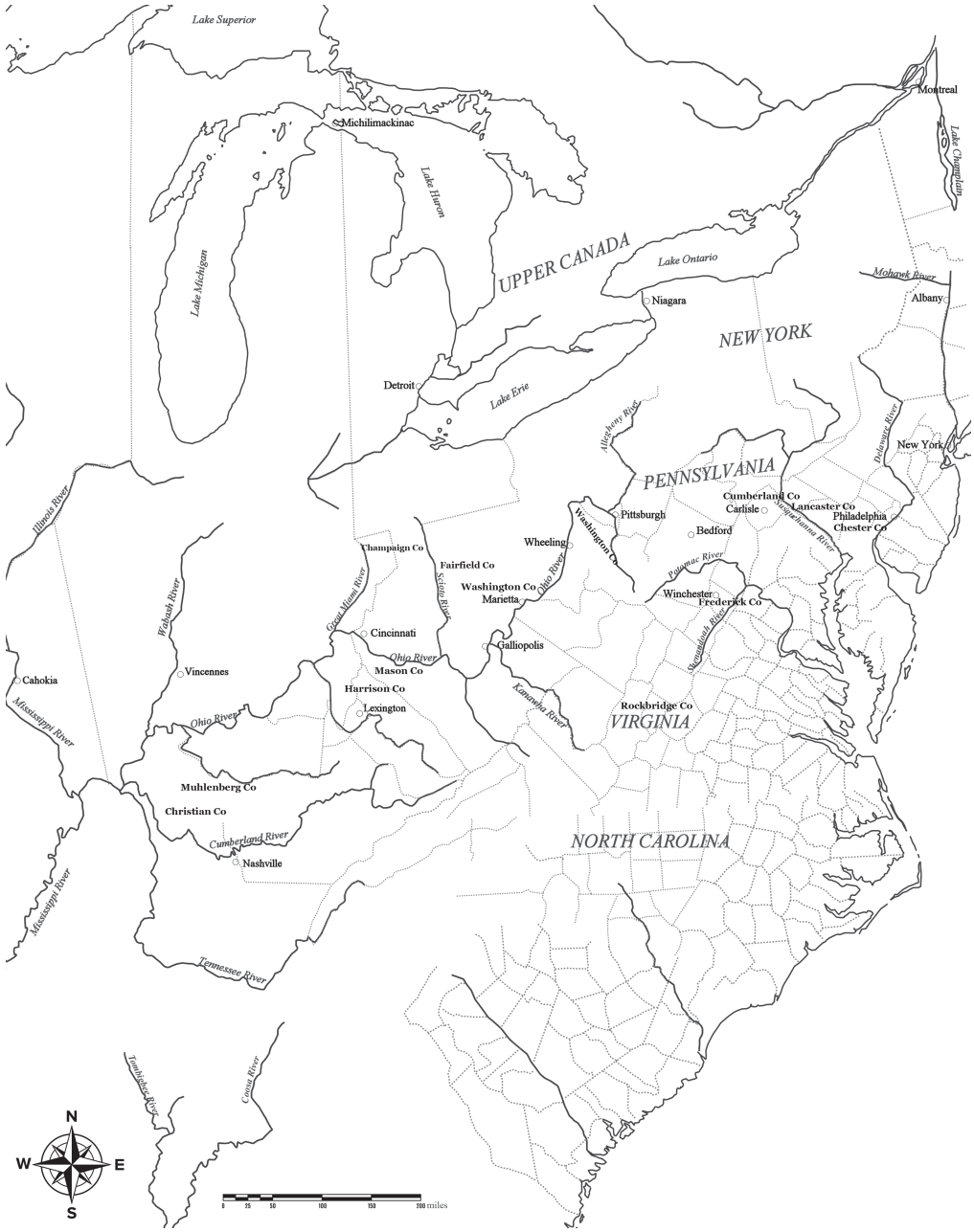


FIG. I.1. The western backcountry at the end of the eighteenth century. County boundaries are those of 1790. The locations of counties studied are identified.

of violence. Such interpretations have built on the work of path-breaking German sociologist Norbert Elias's concept of a "civilizing process." Elias argued that European state formation led to the central state increasingly monopolizing violence and preventing individuals from using violence for their own ends. At the same time, an increase in economic and social interdependence and the development of new standards of personal behavior restrained excessive violence and placed increasing pressures on individuals to conform to the expected norms of society. Stephen Mennell has applied Elias's concept to the United States and concludes that the process did not happen as quickly or as effectively, for "the monopolization of the means of violence by the state has been less complete, and its legitimacy more open to dispute in political debate, than in most other countries."<sup>12</sup>

The focus of most studies of government power is on the powers of the federal or state governments. However, government authority was also undermined at the lowest but most crucial level, that of the county court. County courts served not only a judicial function but also an administrative function. They were the most basic level of government and the organ of government with which frontier colonists had the most contact. Over the second half of the eighteenth century, the role of the county courts changed. Whereas they had been central to resolving disputes between neighbors in order to maintain "the peace," by the end of the eighteenth century for many poorer colonists their use had become largely discredited.<sup>13</sup>

Here I make a broad survey of the court system of the early frontier, studying over sixty-three hundred court cases from thirteen counties across Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky from the 1730s to the 1810s. Such a diverse study can be problematic, as different colonies and states had different legal processes, but it allows for a broad comparative perspective on how attitudes to petty crime and violence were changing across the frontier over the course of eighty years. This study shows that changes in the court system undermined the sense of effective justice that had predominated in the years before the Revolution. With shrewd rich men using the courts for their own advantage, the courts lost much of their authority and legitimacy.<sup>14</sup>

The decline in the authority and legitimacy of the county courts undermined their ability to serve as a forum where ordinary men could resolve petty disputes, which left citizens with few alternatives to protect their status and honor. Church courts were one alternative. In Virginia, before the Forty Years' War, the Anglican church courts and vestry played an essential

role in resolving community disputes; indeed, the county court served as the church court. In Pennsylvania, however, the lack of an established church and the heterogeneity of religious beliefs meant that no similar forum encompassed the entire community, although church courts resolved many disputes within particular denominations. After the Revolution, although the Anglican church was disestablished in Virginia, church vestries, presbyteries, meetings, and courts of various religious groups continued to serve an important social and community role. They were not an official agency of local government, however, and lacked any enforceable jurisdiction. With no easily accessible and authoritative forum to settle disputes, it was easy for many men to resort to violence rather than seeking other means of conflict resolution.<sup>15</sup>

The undermining of the powers of the county court as a formal agent of government authority had a significant impact on the functioning of government at a local level. Roth has argued that problems of nation building were fundamental to violence, as the US government faced more challenges to its legitimacy in the nineteenth century than governments elsewhere and failed to establish its legitimacy in all regions, particularly in the West. However, as Rob Harper has shown, it was also the state's power that enabled violence by raising and equipping militias and providing the protection that colonists needed to feel confident in order to move to the frontier. Rather than simply a crisis in the state's power (be that too much or too little power), then, it was the contest for authority and legitimacy both between states and between men that generated uncertainty and consequently violence. The impact of migration and western conditions undermined traditional authority structures, and this took place not only at the center but also at the level of local government and authority. The problems of projecting state authority in the early West—particularly the delegitimization of authority, reflected in disputes over the nature of the courts and the authority of military commanders—fundamentally hampered attempts by the state to monopolize violence.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, my argument in this book is that many of the roots of western violence lay in a struggle between competing visions of western society and in different constructions of what it meant to be a man in the early West. For many years scholars assumed that manhood was somehow a universal and unchanging principle common to all men and was rooted in biology, although it might be expressed in varying ways at different times and in



different places. Men acted and behaved in the ways they did simply because of their biology and genetics: men will be men, and boys will be boys. However, recently, manhood has been increasingly viewed as a continual and dynamic cultural process.<sup>17</sup> Anthropologists, sociologists, and historians now generally agree that what defines a man (and what makes a man different from a woman) is defined not so much by nature and biology but, rather, by culture: manhood is not so much biological as it is cultural. Post-structuralist theorists, building on the work of Jacques Derrida, have dismantled the concept that gender identities are innate and have argued instead for social constructionism where society and culture define gender. At different times and places, varying roles and behaviors have been central to identifying manhood, separating male from female, and distinguishing adult men from young boys.<sup>18</sup> Within different societies across time and space, the markers of what defined a man—of what made one biological male more of a man than another—have shifted and changed. These markers could take the form of judgments of taste or fashion, where those outside the dominant group were marginalized and shamed, and could also be expressed by physical behavior and ways of living where some felt confident and others felt awkward. These markers were apparent to contemporaries but may be largely hidden to outside observers, such as historians in the twenty-first century.<sup>19</sup>

Some scholars have applied these ideas to the struggles about definitions of manhood and masculinity. They have examined what were the cultural markers in societies that distinguished men from boys and from women and that also created a social order among men. In particular, the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” has been developed and refined by sociologist Raewyn Connell, who has argued that male power is institutionalized in a society’s social structures and ideologies, in which some constructions of manhood are more highly regarded than others. She defines the dominant form of masculinity as “hegemonic masculinity,” which shapes the socialization and ambitions of young men. This hegemony, and consequently masculinity itself, is constantly contested, and different constructions of masculinity may be hegemonic at different times and in different places. Moreover, despite one construction being “hegemonic,” many different conflicting constructions of masculinity may exist simultaneously. All men receive what Connell has termed “a patriarchal dividend” from the organization of society, even if they find themselves excluded from hegemonic dominance.

Therefore, the structure benefits all men, regardless of where they lie in the social order. Indeed, hegemonic masculinity relies on the subordination and marginalization of lesser or weaker men to create a social structure of men. However, hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily mean total control. The hegemonic domination of society by one construction of masculinity is not automatic and can be disrupted by other competing constructions. Indeed, opposing constructions of masculinity can exist side by side and be in conflict with one another. Some constructions exist within others, like Russian dolls; there can be masculine subcultures within broader cultures.<sup>20</sup>

I argue that such competing constructions of masculinity emerged on the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century frontier. Different groups of men—elite men, military men, poor farmers, and laborers—struggled to define a dominant notion of manhood. Some groups turned to ownership of land and property as expressing their masculinity, but others turned to violent actions. One common theme across nearly all constructions of gender in different cultures and at different times is that men are more violent than women; violence is nearly always a male attribute. This may result from men's greater strength and size compared to women or because women bear children. However, in almost every society, it is men—particularly young men, who are fitter and stronger—who are the most violent. Ideas of masculinity's connection with force and violence have a long history within European culture. However, the Renaissance and Reformation inculcated a belief that men should control their violence, although older ideas about physical strength persisted. Because social and familial control depended ultimately upon the use of force, manhood continued to be linked with force, and men continued to believe that they could use force to assert themselves. That these ideas of a violent assertion of manhood should reemerge at the same time that definitions of manhood were highly contested is not, therefore, entirely surprising.<sup>21</sup>

These anxieties about manhood were particularly pressing because the American Revolution both caused an intense questioning of traditional patriarchy and also undermined traditional concepts of authority. Republican ideology stressed the centrality of personal and economic independence, and the quest for economic and personal independence fed western expansion as men believed that they could find land, and thus independence, in the West. Many headed west in search of new opportunities, foreshadowing by many decades Horace Greeley's famous dictum, "Go West Young Man."<sup>22</sup>

However, instead of finding land and independence in the West, colonists discovered economic turmoil and uncertainty. In particular, disputes over landholding and economic disruption caused by the rapid development of the region and by the Forty Years' War meant that many men faced an uncertain future; once a man had achieved independence, he could never be sure he was not going to slip back into dependence. Security and land could be lost almost overnight.<sup>23</sup>

In a culture where the constructions of manhood were being transformed and men, particularly poorer men, lacked the requisites for claiming full manhood, men needed to find other ways to assert their manhood. They would forge a new construction of manhood on the frontier, and violence would play a central role in that construction. In this book I study those struggles to shape the nature of early western society and the nature of western manhood.<sup>24</sup> I examine how ordinary men struggled to define their authority, identity, and manhood in the rapidly changing world of the late eighteenth-century West. In part, this struggle was a very visible physical struggle against the terrain and the physical environment, to clear sufficient land, establish a farm, raise a crop, and support a family. For the colonists, it was also a struggle against Native people, both to wrest the land from the control of the people who originally lived there and then to maintain the colonist families in the West despite the continuing threat of raids by Native warriors.

It was not only Native people who sought to deny western men access to the lands of the Ohio Valley, but also the wealthy elites and speculators, who turned increasingly to the courts as a means of depriving poorer men of lands they thought they possessed. As wealthy men deprived others of their lands, as western men toiled to make a living and protect their families, this also became a struggle to define a construction of manhood to which most western men could subscribe; it was a struggle for cultural hegemony in the West. Ordinary men struggled against elite constructions of manhood, which stressed gentility, manners, and consumer goods. Such constructions of manhood evidently excluded poorer men. These poorer men defined their own alternative constructions of manhood, by which they could claim their manhood and share in what Connell termed the "patriarchal dividend."<sup>25</sup>

For many men migration west was a tale of failure, at least in the short term. Despite the image of the frontier as a place of opportunity and plenty, most men initially failed. It was only through repeated attempts to

establish themselves that they ultimately succeeded in achieving independence. In this book I study that struggle and how it shaped the development of constructions of western manhood. The focus is on how failure in the West shaped western culture and led to men returning to more traditional physical constructions of masculinity that encouraged a quick and frequent resort to violence. The image of the western frontiersman that emerged in this era—of the fighting, heavy-drinking, rifle-carrying, coonskin-hat-wearing pioneer, best typified by Davy Crockett—was a conscious creation, a construction in response to these challenges. I will explore how all these numerous different forces combined in a perfect storm of challenges to create the image of the frontiersman and how those images shaped western men's behavior and would ultimately influence the culture not only of the West but also of the United States as a whole.<sup>26</sup>