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Dividing the Land: Early American Beginnings of Our Private Property Mosaic. by Edward T. Price

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areas of disagreement. Based on research undertaken in five nations, *The Economics of Emancipation* will be a useful book for all concerned with the study of slavery, emancipation, and the British West Indies.

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THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

Dividing the Land: Early American Beginnings of Our Private Property Mosaic. By Edward T. Price. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. xviii, 410. \$26.00.

Although Colonial America's vast expanse of undivided land may have been its most distinctive feature, we know comparatively little about how settlers divvied up the land. The "frontier thesis" generated a wealth of scholarship on nineteenth-century land politics and land distribution; but much less for the Colonial era. Edward T. Price's *Dividing the Land* is the first attempt to address the topic systematically in each of the original 13 colonies as well as Vermont, Maine, Kentucky, Tennessee, Texas, Louisiana, and Quebec. The book seeks to explain how settlers made land into property and why the Eastern seaboard developed the varied and irregular *cadastral* (land-ownership) patterns that differ so strikingly from the uniform and often grid-like maps of the trans-Appalachian states. The result is an ambitious survey—filled with bundles of facts and keen insights, but lacking a broader interpretive vision.

The bulk of Price's study describes how enduring land settlement patterns evolved from a jumble of chance, custom, and necessity. The quite dissimilar land distribution systems that first emerged in New England and Virginia in turn exercised a powerful influence over the evolution of land ownership in later settled colonies. New Englanders parceled out land through the *township*—a practice that forced a relative compactness of settlement and the joining of acreages of different qualities. Virginia (and subsequently most of the southern colonies) generally distributed land by awarding colonists *headrights* (a right to a designated number of acres) for every person they transported across the Atlantic. These headrights could then be used to patent more or less any unclaimed land within the colony—a practice called *indiscriminate location*, which often undermined the compact settlement and social cohesion desired by colony promoters. As the successors of the original colonists grew more powerful and organized in their efforts to settle and "improve" the land, these distribution regimes reproduced themselves over ever-greater stretches of terrain. Some of the book's most intriguing points arise out of Price's effort to show the strength of these early models as well as the limits of their influence—how, for example, the township burst forth from New England and sank deep roots across the northern colonies but wilted away in the Carolinas and other southerly climes. In untangling these complex patterns, Price reveals how the property lines that Europeans etched on the land marked the changing priorities of settlers, speculators, and colonial authorities, as well as the shifting balance of power among these groups.

In most respects Price's study reinforces rather than overturns established scholarly assumptions. Indeed, the book's true merit lies not in its novelty but rather in its depth and breadth of research. In Price's voluminous data one can clearly see how increasing state power and economic integration played a pivotal role in imposing regularity and order on cadastral maps. It was the extreme weakness of the English state that created the great variety of land-ownership patterns in the colonies. Because England at first lacked the power to effect its aims across the Atlantic, it was forced to rely upon the settlers to determine how the land would be distributed and settled. Not surprisingly, colonists parceled out land with a keen regard to topography, land quality, river frontage, and the presence of Native populations. But once colonists secured their tenuous beachheads on

the coast, the increasing integration of the British Atlantic created growing pools of immigrants and capital that allowed colonial oligarchs and metropolitan authorities to promote colonization with increasing organization, control, and uniformity. The order, regularity, and speed with which William Penn founded Philadelphia in 1682 (as compared to the settlement of Boston a half-century earlier) testifies to these changes.

The weakness of Price's study is that these larger issues are often left unexplored. The increased control, which allowed colonization on a mounting scale, also gave colony founders a greater ability to shape the political and economic structure of new settlements. But this issue is never addressed. The speed and manner in which settlers unseated Native peoples also determined the form of subsequent settlement; but Price gives little attention to these factors. The book lacks the strong interpretive framework that could connect the disparate elements of property formation to more elusive questions about patronage politics, capitalism, and the evolving balance of power between actual settlers and the distant authorities who nominally controlled settlement. In many ways, historians reading the book may find that the pursuit of the divergent interpretive goals of history and historical geography leads to repeated dissatisfaction. But if the book's interpretive reach is lacking, its breadth, comprehensiveness, and thorough detail commend it to any student of Colonial land issues. Notwithstanding its limitations it is certainly the most detailed and complete examination of the origins of land ownership patterns in Colonial America.

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Creating the Commonwealth: The Economic Culture of Puritan New England. By Stephen Innes. W. W. Norton, 1995. Pp. x, 416. \$25.00.

Massachusetts Bay colonists created a commonwealth, argues Stephen Innes, that was remarkably economically successful in its early years, which was no small feat given its initial shortages of capital and labor. In accounting for the growth of the colony, Innes turns our attention away from demography, persistence of the commons, church-centered townships, or moral economy, and toward two other major considerations: Puritan colonists' rapid departures from English economic traditions and the merits of Max Weber's theoretical contributions about the "protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism."

Massachusetts Bay succeeded, writes Innes, because colonists cleared away Old World restraints on economic activity, including guilds, permanent and overweening monopolies, and wage and price controls, and because its federal-style governments promoted a "civic ecology" that encouraged acquisition, improvement, and productive labor grounded on a land system of widely held parcels suited to the market economy that emerged within the first generation. Settlers subscribed to a labor theory of value that gave meaning and dignity to work; they brought a diversity of skills and pooled scarce capital resources—especially in shipbuilding; and governments helped create prosperous iron works and far-flung commerce. More: the colony self-consciously created an associational civil society, premised on mutual dependence and consensual obligations, that freed the individual to pursue a calling with a minimum of interference, provided there existed the appropriate degree of internalized restraint.

One area where Innes adds much conceptually, and gives pause about New England's distinctiveness, is in combining this early economic "takeoff" with the social and institutional culture that actively promoted it. Reaffirming what a few bold studies have posited recently, Innes explains that creating capitalist markets (though, we would have to insist, not a market society yet) did not presage the fall of a community ethos. In fact, the ethos of Protestantism, as deployed by Bay Colonists, was key to their capitalist success; good Puritans were enjoined to excel in a calling—to profit—and simultaneously restrain their self-interest from excess. Revisiting Perry Miller and explicating the best points in Weber's thesis, Innes offers the argument that not just economic ability, but also a cultural will to