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The Settlers’ Empire is an ambitious book, an examination of the creation—and implications—of government in the Great Lakes region known as the Old Northwest. Taking a fresh approach to midwestern political history, Bethel Saler sets her extensive research about Wisconsin in the larger contexts of American territorial expansion, the evolution of republican government, Indian-white relations, and the history of women and the family in the period from the 1780s to 1860. She recognizes the United States as both a postcolonial republic and a settler empire. The United States and countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, Saler comments, have “an ambivalent double history as both colonized and colonizers” (2). Following upon recent comparative scholarship on European colonialism, she tells the stories of political institution building with consistent attention to the fact that dispossession of Native people was an essential component of that political development. In addition, she demonstrates the ways that governmental structures institutionalized certain patriarchal ideas about families, households, gender, and race.

In an examination of the Northwest Territory’s early political development, Saler uses her interpretation of colonialism to detail how officials created distinct governing administrations for Native peoples and Euro-Americans. After the Treaty of Paris of 1783 more than doubled the size of the new United States from the original thirteen colonies, the Northwest Ordinance developed from the idea of “a temporary colonialism” (19) for non-Native settlers that would allow new states equal status within the nation. It included legal principles such as the common law and trial by jury, as well as ideals of patriarchal families. At the same time, Indian policy was guided by ideas of “indefinite federal colonial rule” over indigenous peoples who were seen as “quasi-foreign political bodies” (27).

To view the early implementation of these systems, Saler focuses on the reality on the ground in the lower Northwest, especially the Ohio country. This region included a wide variety of Native peoples, French Creoles, and independent-minded Anglo-American squatters. She examines the difficulties and frustrations that appointed leaders such as Brigadier General Josiah Harmar and Governor Arthur St. Clair experienced in governing such scattered and myriad peoples, most of whom held no particular allegiance to the new United States. Federal officials felt an urgent need to claim the
allegiance of Indians as well as other peoples east of the Mississippi, fearing that the Spanish west of the river might entice the population into their orbit. The territory’s residents were not easily cowed, according to Saler; however, Native and non-Native peoples eventually conceded the federal government’s power to determine the rules and processes for territorial, provincial, and local leadership during the years after the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794.

Shifting the focus to Wisconsin, Saler also examines the workings of what she terms the “treaty polity” (4)—that is, the set of officials, laws, and processes that was established to control the Native peoples west of Lake Michigan, which included treaty conferences, contracts, Indian agents, military forts to enforce regulations and agreements, and projects such as model farms designed to “civilize” Native people and impose Euro-American gender roles and economic patterns. As an example of the ways this system served the federal government’s needs, Saler explores the Treaty of Prairie du Chien in 1825. She interprets it as a conference designed to force indigenous peoples to organize themselves as discrete “nation-states” (105) with exclusive territories that could later be ceded in order to encourage the centralization of leadership and to “confirm American sovereignty over Wisconsin Indian peoples” (119). The treaty polity was complex and uneven in administration, as Saler demonstrates through a series of well-chosen examples involving Ho-Chunks, Menomines, Sauks, Stockbridge and Brothertown Indians, and others.

Saler also explores the efforts of Christian missionaries and the varieties of Native responses to their proselytizing and acculturation projects, contrasting the priorities, attitudes, and actions of Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Whereas Protestants felt that cultural change (“civilization”) and Christian faith were equally important, Catholics focused on rituals more than on the “inward proofs of piety” (176) that Protestants required. In addition, Saler argues that Catholics were more tolerant of converts who maintained significant components of Native culture. Saler explains that Native responses varied: “vernacular” people began to include some aspects of Christian belief in their complex and increasingly cosmopolitan societies; “Christian” Indians acculturated but still identified as both Christians and Indians; and “traditional” Native people critiqued and resisted missionaries’ efforts. Interestingly, she argues that “all three responses resulted in the assertion of new Indian identities within the context of American state formation” (190). Still, these different responses caused the development of some political factions within Native communities, which led to different types of resistance and adaptation to removal efforts. Furthermore, Saler argues that missionaries’ efforts with both Native and non-Native peoples in Wisconsin were “part of diffuse and extensive debates over defining principles and social reform of the American nation-state as a whole” (200).
For Saler, family and marriage were “cornerstone[s]” (9) of settler territorial governance. After the War of 1812, what is now Wisconsin became part of Michigan Territory, at which point Governor Lewis Cass began to make serious efforts to assert control over this region, which had previously owed allegiance to British Canada. A whole new political and judicial system was introduced, toward which the Creole residents were at best ambivalent. Judges used grand juries and indictments to enforce the new laws, beginning with regulations regarding marriage, sexuality, gender relations, and family roles. Saler argues that by focusing on these types of laws, Anglo-American officials enforced their own norms in order to emphasize the “importance of familial affairs to the federal initiative of organizing a new western territory” (215) and to express and preserve racial distinctions.

To illustrate, Saler explores the ways that a Yankee judge who disapproved of fur trade couples’ unlicensed “country” marriages charged the men with fornication in Green Bay and Prairie du Chien during the 1820s, forcing them to marry according to law in order to establish patriarchal families and ensure that wives’ property would be controlled and conveyed by husbands. Many of these wives were Native or of mixed ancestry.

Shifting her gaze, Saler looks at a sensational case of a “lost child” (216) during the 1840s, in the context of Menominee and Ho-Chunk efforts to avoid losing their lands to the government’s Indian removal policy. A white family whose toddler had vanished two years earlier claimed that a small child living with a nearby Menominee family was theirs and had been kidnapped. Although a judge ruled in favor of the Native mother, the white family stole the child and fled. In her exploration of this case, which generated considerable excitement and heated rhetoric in Wisconsin, Saler examines racial tensions and the ways they were expressed in depictions of these Native and Anglo mothers.

Saler concludes by analyzing the difficulties of creating a state constitution for Wisconsin in order to move it out of territorial status. The first effort of 1846–47 failed, but a second compromise document was approved by voters in 1848. Saler sees attempts to create a governmental structure as both a creative effort to “imagine their state in its future life” and a “kind of storytelling” (249) in which they legitimated the settler colonialism that created their province. After the first constitutional convention failed to secure sufficient voter support on the controversial issues of banks, homestead exemptions, married women’s property, and black male suffrage, a second meeting crafted a document that avoided addressing these issues by using vague language and deferring decisions to later public referendums. In a creative interpretive move, Saler discusses the founding of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and its important role in collecting the documents that allow people to understand a complex past in very nuanced ways. The creation of both the constitutions and the historical organization, to Saler, illustrates not only the ways that the state and its his-
tory were “culturally inscribed [and] temporally contingent” (298) but also the important roles that family, gender, and race continued to play as the region transitioned from territory to state.

For those unfamiliar with this topic, *The Settlers’ Empire* will likely be a useful introduction to the political history of the Great Lakes region from the 1780s to the Civil War, but even those who know the details well will find Saler’s take on them interesting, as she situates this narrative in the interpretive framework of exciting recent research on colonialism, race, gender, and political history. By doing so, she revises previous scholarship that often ignored the history of women and gender and the introduction of patriarchy. She also presents a discussion of midwestern settlement and institution building that is much more balanced and nuanced than older accounts by considering both the difficulties that officials faced in crafting the new regime in this borderland and the ways that Indian communities experienced and responded to that regime’s incredibly destructive policies.