

## Review Essay: The Line

By Edwin Danson. *Drawing the Line: How Mason and Dixon Surveyed the Most Famous Border in America.*

(New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2001. Pp. viii, 232, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index.)

By William Ecenbarger. *Walkin' the Line: A Journey From Past to Present along the Mason-Dixon.*

(New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc., 2000. Pp. 222, illustrations, maps.)

Arguably the best known state boundary line in America, the Mason-Dixon Line was, as William Ecenbarger observes in his book *Walkin' the Line*, "an achievement of skill and courage." In surveying the Line, Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon—two English astronomer-mathematicians—encountered "accidents, hostile Indians, snow-covered mountains, dense forests, flooded rivers, wild animals, and nit-picking bureaucrats." (Ecenbarger, p. 17.) While Edwin Danson's book documents the actual surveying of the Line, Ecenbarger's book deals more with its social symbolism. Every schoolboy and schoolgirl knows that the Mason-Dixon Line was the official boundary between the North and the South and therefore between slave-holding states and free states. The Line was nicknamed "the River Jordan" by Underground Railroad conductors and fugitive slaves, and when one crossed the "Jordan," you found yourself in "the Promised Land." Therefore, a full comprehension of the significance of the Mason-Dixon Line in Pennsylvania history must rest upon two concepts. First, the Line was plotted to settle a family feud over territory between the Calverts of Maryland and the Penns of Pennsylvania. Second, the Line then became the symbol of freedom for African American slaves and thereafter the source of constant political tension between the states of Maryland and Pennsylvania until after the Civil War. The highlights of this political battle were the famous *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* United States Supreme Court case of 1842 and the 1859 Christiana riot. Both events involved Maryland slave owners and fugitive slaves.

Danson begins his book with the century-old family feud between the Calverts and the Penns. The vagueness of the English royalty land grants to the families was the immediate cause of the dispute. The author then documents how Mason and Dixon were brought to America in 1763 to settle this feud by surveying the borderline between the colonies of Delaware, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. Mason and Dixon employed novel survey techniques to cover 325 miles of wilderness for more than four years in surveying the Line. Danson is a geodetic surveyor, a Chartered Surveyor of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, and a Fellow of the Institution of Civil Engineering Surveyors in Great Britain. Leaning upon the Jeremiah Dixon Journal, Danson weaves a fascinating tale of science and history that is ostensibly aimed at his fellow surveyors as a reading audience. The reader is greeted with much technical discussion of the problems of longitude calculations at milestones along the Line. Much attention is given to specific geographical landmarks such as mountains, streams, ridges, and valleys. *Drawing the Line* comes equipped with an appendix of mathematical calculations and diagrams. There are two stories in Danson's book. One is the historical tale of how Mason and Dixon surveyed the Line. The other story is of the surveying methods they utilized. A balance of both stories is needed but Danson seems to emphasize the scientific over the historical story.

On the other hand, *Walkin' the Line* is the chronicle of former *Reader's Digest* and United Press International journalist William Ecenbarger. Ecenbarger walked from the beginning of the Mason-Dixon Line on Fenwick Island, Delaware to its end at Brown's Hill, Pennsylvania. Like Danson, Ecenbarger quotes from Dixon's Journal but not as often. He is more likely, however, to quote from a few of the 1,000 or so townspeople he interviewed along the Mason-Dixon Line. At the outset, Ecenbarger expected to write a book similar to Danson's, recounting the story of Mason and Dixon, what had happened in the past along the Line, and how people today felt about it. But "no matter how many ways I shuffled the deck, the race card kept coming to the top. And so I resolved to view the Line through the lens of race." (Ecenbarger, pp. 13-14.) It is this slant that gives *Walkin' the Line* its unique appeal. Oral history accounts sparkle throughout the book as the reader travels with the author through a racial netherworld full of the ghosts of the Civil War and the Underground Railroad. For instance, Ecenbarger's visit to the home of Dave Garrett on the Kennett Pike is typical of the interviews. When Garrett answers the door, he says: "The Line

runs right through the front door. You're standing in Pennsylvania, I'm in Delaware....He hands me a flashlight and takes me to the basement. Six wooden steps lead down to a 12-by-6 foot room with stone walls and an arched ceiling. It is believed that [Harriet] Tubman went by here on her initial flight to freedom." (Ecenbarger, p.103) Other historical figures such as Thomas Garrett, Frederick Douglass, William and Ellen Craft, and events like the Chaneyville Incident and the Christiana Riot emerge in *Walkin' the Line*. Stories also abound about the Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania, Jim Crow, and the Klu Klux Klan. Many of the people interviewed by Ecenbarger gave first-hand accounts or were descendants of people involved in historical events. Like the author says, the race card is really prominent in his book.

These two books underscore the importance of Mid-Atlantic history, something not always appreciated by Pennsylvania historians and students. The Mason-Dixon Line is a splendid exemplar of this. Danson and Ecenbarger have succeeded in their own ways of telling the story of the Line. While readers might find Ecenbarger's book the more readable of the two, both *Drawing the Line* and *Walkin' the Line* are required reading for anyone wishing to learn about this fabled boundary.

Eric Ledell Smith, *Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission*