



1831: Year of Eclipse

Louis P. Masur

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1776, 1861, 1929. Any high-school student should know what these years meant to American history. But wars and economic disasters are not our only pivotal events, and other years have, in a quieter way, swayed the course of our nation. 1831 was one of them, and in this striking new work, Louis Masur shows us exactly how.

The year began with a solar eclipse, for many an omen of mighty changes -- and for once, such predictions held true. Nat Turner's rebellion soon followed, then ever-more violent congressional arguments over slavery and tariffs. Religious revivalism swept the North, and important observers (including Tocqueville) traveled the land, forming the opinions that would shape the world's view of America for generations to come. New technologies, meanwhile, were dramatically changing Americans' relationship with the land, and Andrew Jackson's harsh policies toward the Cherokee erased most Indians' last hopes of autonomy. As Masur's analysis makes clear, by 1831 it was becoming all too certain that political rancor, the struggle over slavery, the pursuit of individualism, and technological development might eclipse the glorious potential of the early republic--and lead the nation to secession and civil war. This is an innovative and challenging interpretation of a key moment in antebellum America.

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