

## Civil War Book Review

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### Buying And Selling The Civil War

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## **Editorial**

### **BUYING AND SELLING THE CIVIL WAR**

**Knull, Morgan**

**Spring 2000**

In a paper delivered in April at the 30th annual conference of the Popular Cultural Association, David Madden declared pop culture the medium through which the Civil War is made present in our own day. "Just as the simple visual image of the Confederate battle flag can focus feelings and attitudes of millions," he noted, "so the multitude of other products of popular culture can keep the Civil War more alive in the emotions, imaginations, and intellects of Americans than any other war."

History cannot interpret itself; that task--one might even say obligation--is left to each generation to contend with, as it strives to connect with the past and to imprint the present. Pop culture offers many points of access to the War: offering average people an entree to reenacting, historical fiction and romances, television and film depictions, and the burgeoning variety of websites devoted to facets of the War. In this issue, we interview John Jakes, whose popular North and South trilogy (and later mini-series) introduced the Civil War's drama to millions of Americans.

With uneven degrees of scholarly rigor but a universal passion for the subject, pop culture mediates between historical indifferentism and obscurantism. It is valuable not only for making history accessible, but because it often is what engages the imagination of the young. As Katie Theriot's feature in these pages reveals, more than one Civil War historian was first attracted to the subject through novels and popular histories such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and Bell Wiley's *Johnny Reb* and *Billy Yank* books.

Beyond sthetic snobbery, objections to pop history include concerns about its tendency to take undue moral and historical license with the facts.

Robert Bracken, a retired attorney in Indiana, recently sent me a speech that he delivered in the 1940s while an undergraduate at Wabash College. The text notes in passing that *Gone with the Wind* had been banned from public school

reading lists in Indianapolis because it was deemed "not suitable for young minds and well bred ladies." One might observe the same about war itself. Ironically, today *Gone with the Wind* is more likely to stand accused of romanticizing antebellum life than of corrupting the young.

More serious is pop history's penchant for sacrificing historical accuracy in favor of a good plot line. The publicity for Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* included school kits that represented artful quotes from the script as having been spoken by John Quincy Adams, leading critics to charge Spielberg with blurring the boundary between fact and fiction. But literalism is language of scholars rather than of consumers. For most folks, Shakespeare's poetic rendering of Henry V's heroic speech at Agincourt offers an adequate portrayal of the battle's significance. Sometimes art even improves upon the hoary facts of history.

There is, of course, no guarantee that history textbooks or newspapers always get the story right, and new technologies such as the Web and print-on-demand publishing only make it easier for factual errors and distortions to enter public circulation. For that reason, the proper posture toward pop culture must be to enjoy its products and pleasures, while maintaining a reasonable commitment to sorting out the factual from the far-fetched. Keeping up with new books on history and public affairs is essential to that process, and in a larger sense to fulfilling the responsibilities of citizenship. Reading *Civil War Book Review* helps, too.