

Civil War Book Review

Spring 2001

Article 33

Feature Essay

David Madden

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Madden, David (2001) "Feature Essay," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol3/iss2/33>

Feature Essay

Spring 2001

Madden, David *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS:Marx's American Manifesto.*

"Here, Mr. President, is another letter from that little girl in London," Lincoln's assistant may have said. "Is she still exhorting me not to be discouraged?" The little girl's father, a 40-year-old Prussian Jew, raised as a Christian, living in abject poverty in London's Soho, dreaming of immigrating to America to live in Texas, was so vitally fascinated by the progress of the American Civil War that he enthralled his whole family, especially little Jenny. His name was Karl Marx.

He who reported on a civil war in America was at the same time conjuring up a scheme that would have an even greater tragic impact upon the history of the world. That Karl Marx observed and published articles on the Civil War for the Vienna newspaper *Die Presse* while also publishing articles at the instigation of Charles A. Dana in Horace Greeley's *New York Daily Tribune* comes as a great surprise to the millions of Americans who take an interest in the war, including some historians. I don't recall an historian ever alluding to Marx's Civil War commentary. Given the fact that Marx had already published his *Communist Manifesto* in 1848 and was at that moment in the British Museum researching *Das Kapital*, which would be published just two years after the war, during Reconstruction, one might reasonably expect that some historian would have examined his Civil War writing in the context of those and other works by Marx.

Well, what has not been done, has not been done. But what may be done? The first, easiest step, is to read Marx's commentary, then either read his other works (have you but world enough and time) or a good summary of his basic ideas. Because Marx doesn't tell us directly what we would expect him to tell us, we must imagine.

The next step demands even greater effort: imagine intellectually, first, how his early writings might have influenced his comments on the issues whirling

around and spinning off the Civil War, and how the war itself might have influenced his thinking as revealed in the earth-shaking *Das Kapital*; second, imagine how the ideas in all his works (written mostly in collaboration with Frederick Engels) might be applied—a Marxian interpretation—to the study of the Civil War. What fresh insights might that unique perspective startle into view? Only those of us who take up this challenge will ever know. (Unless we publish our research and meditations.)

From 1932 to 1984, several books have gathered Marx's and Engels's newspaper articles on America. International Publishers brought out a 1937 edition entitled *The Civil War in the United States* and, more recently, its *Collected Works* contains some relevant selections (see Volume 19 [ISBN 0717805190, \$24.95 hardcover] and Volume 41 [ISBN 0717805417, \$24.95 hardcover]). The work that I most strongly recommend to a university press for reprinting is **Karl Marx On America and the Civil War**, which was edited, translated, and introduced by that great Jefferson scholar Saul K. Padover and published by McGraw-Hill in 1972. It includes a chronology of Marx as a journalist and writer, a chronology of the Civil War and Reconstruction, a biographical index, and an interesting choice of illustrations.

Marx's "Views of America" stretch from 1846 through 1871, augmented by personal letters from 1846 through 1881. "The Civil War" section offers Marx's articles from October 1861 to December 1862; those are augmented by many letters, mostly to Engels, from 1860 to 1869. With Austrians as one audience and Americans as another, Marx sees the Civil War in the context of the contemporaneous "Mexican imbroglio" of France and England, of the crisis in the cotton market in England and India, of a running attack on England's sympathy for slaveholders of the South, and of a chronological account of the Trent Affair.

His target audience is, as always, the workers of the world, the alienated underclass, whose hour would come in America when slaves freed by Lincoln would unite with the white peasants of the South and the wage slaves of the North to bring about the "dictatorship of the proletariat." In "Address of the International Working Men's Association to President Johnson" (1865), Marx writes that Lincoln was "one of the rare men who succeed in becoming great, without ceasing to be good. Such, indeed, was the modesty of this great and good man, that the world only discovered him a hero after he had fallen a martyr." Then he extends his admiration to Johnson: "You will never forget that,

to initiate the new era of the emancipation of labor, the American people devolved the responsibilities of leadership upon two men of labor—the one Abraham Lincoln, the other Andrew Johnson."

Simultaneously, Marx wrote often enough on China (from 1850 to 1860) to justify a separate, volume, published in 1951 (*Marx on China*, Lawrence & Wishart, 121 pp.). In view of the fact that China became, after a later civil war, one of the most powerful Communist forces on earth, it is ironic that the Christianity-inspired Taiping Civil War (1850-1865) began before the American one and continued afterwards. Six million soldiers and civilians died in that war, far less, we sadly know, than died under the heel of the Communist colossus worldwide. I propose then, as a giant further step, that we compare both those civil wars in light of Marx's revolutionary vision. Thus may we weave webs of causes and consequences where we may feel the bite of some unexpected insight.

Donald and Velvia Crumbley Professor of Creative Writing at Louisiana State University, David Madden has made notes for a primer on civil war worldwide, throughout history, but that project must wait until he has finished London Bridge Is Falling Down, having resigned as founding director of the United States Civil War Center in 1999 to write that novel. He is the editor of Beyond the Battlefield (2000) and of Classics of Civil War Fiction (1991), soon to be reissued by University of Alabama Press, where he is co-editor of a series by that name.