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Interview

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Ayers, Edward L.

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Interview with Dr. Edward L. Ayers

by Christopher S. Freeman

Edward L. Ayers is Hugh P. Kelly Professor of History and Dean of College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia. His first book, The Promise of the New South, was a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award finalist.

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Over the last five years, what trends have you observed in Civil War scholarship and publications? Do any hold any particular promise or are you troubled by any of these recent trends?

Edward L. Ayers (EA): The clear trend has been toward the fuller integration of the battlefield and the home front. Scholars with orientations toward both specialties have worked toward the middle, with both recognizing that they need the other to construct compelling narratives and arguments. This strikes me as an entirely healthy development. I have not seen any trend in particular that troubles me in the scholarship, for it seems to me that we are finding ever more capacious ways of understanding this complicated part of the American past.

CWBR: What are the most important Civil War books of the last five years? Are there any aspects or approaches to the history of the Civil War Era that have been neglected by contemporary historians?

EA: I have particularly benefited from the book *Religion and the Civil War* edited by Randall Miller and others; the broad-ranging essays there take us much closer to an understanding of the centrality of religious faith to both sides and the

contradictory meanings that faith held. Allen Guelzo's book on Lincoln also strikes me as a real advance on the religious front.

CWBR: Historical interpretation affects and is affected by contemporary politics and events. How will recent events alter the types of questions historians will contemplate about the Civil War?

EA:I hope and imagine that future generations of Civil War historians will continue to do what a number, such as Michl Fellman and Charles Royster among others, have been doing for about a decade now: insisting on the fundamental place of bloodshed, chaos, and suffering in the war. If there is one thing that concerns me most about the field it is that so many people continue to see the Civil War as an elaborate game, a blameless inevitable struggle, or a high-minded struggle. Historians have a responsibility to challenge that understanding by refusing to glorify the war, even one that eventuated in Union and freedom.