

### Traditions And Transformations:Five Years Of Civil War Books

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#### Recommended Citation

Rodrigue, Sylvia Frank (2004) "Traditions And Transformations:Five Years Of Civil War Books," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss3/5>

## Interview

### TRADITIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS: FIVE YEARS OF CIVIL WAR BOOKS

Rodrigue, Sylvia Frank

Summer 2004

Interview with Sylvia Frank Rodrigue

by Christopher S. Freeman

*Sylvia Frank Rodrigue is former editor-in-chief of Louisiana State University Press, where over the course of eight years she acquired more than 180 books of history, political science, literary criticism, and poetry. Prior to moving to Louisiana in 1996, she was managing editor at Stackpole Books in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. Her current projects include co-editorship of The Louisiana Encyclopedia.*

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

**Sylvia Frank Rodrigue (SR):** Many earlier conclusions are being challenged by recent scholarship, including comprehensive studies of such battles as Fredericksburg and Cold Harbor, biographies of men and women, both the famous and those of less prominence. It's exciting to see new studies of Reconstruction; analyses of legend, memory and myth; an expansion of what we know as women's roles; and works on Southern Unionists, the naval war, politics, and medical care.

It seems fewer first-person accounts are being published now, as competition for slots on publishers' list is tighter than ever. More of those slots are being filled by popular and scholarly studies, which tend to be more profitable than diaries, memoirs, and letter collections.

Although Civil War letters and diaries have an immediacy not found in secondary works, more are available than could ever be published profitably. If the goal is to make first-person accounts widely accessible, online publishing might be the best option.

***CWBR: What do you feel are the most important Civil War publications of the last five years? Are there any aspects or approaches to the Civil War Era that have been neglected, or overdone?***

**SR:**Arguably the most important recent study of the Civil War is *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* by David W. Blight. Each book in the Overland Campaign series by Gordon Rhea is a wonder of research and storytelling. One of the most popular and long-awaited works has been *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* by Edward L. Ayers. A recently released study of the Civil War era--and winner of the Pulitzer and Bancroft--is *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* by Steven Hahn.

No one book or type of book will please or interest all Civil War readers, but the current mix of books and topics available seems well suited to a wide variety of readers.

***CWBR: What accounts for the continued popularity and profitability of books on the Civil War? Will this trend continue on into the foreseeable future?***

**SR:**The war holds a visceral appeal for those whose imaginations are excited by stories of battles, leaders, soldiers, slaves, surgeons and nurses, people whose loved ones are away at war, and people whose homes and livelihoods were destroyed by the ravages of war. The Civil War shaped our nation and lay the groundwork for what has come afterward; most importantly, it ended the practice of slavery, transforming race relations forever.

Every year more children and adults come to a realization of the war's importance, and they want to explore what happened and why. We must seek to move beyond romanticized notions of a war fought cleanly by gentlemen soldiers who held pure convictions about the justness of their causes and were supported unconditionally by their families at home. We must learn the truths and analyze the complexities to attain a real understanding of battlefield

conditions, the humanity of those involved, the war's accomplishments, and the sacrifices made for the rebirth of our nation. The way to do that is to continue to encourage new scholarship on all aspects of the war, and to publish, read, and discuss the results of new research and analysis. I don't see an end to our desire to learn more about the Civil War or a decrease of interest in the topic's popularity.