

The Most Fearful Ordeal: Original Coverage of the Civil War

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Review

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Walther, Eric H. *The Shattering of the Union: America in the 1850s*. Scholarly Resources Inc., \$17.95 ISBN 842027998

Irreconcilable differences

On the fast track to war

Eric Walther's recent publication, **The Shattering of the Union: America in the 1850's**, part of the *American Crisis Series: Books on the Civil War Era*, attempts to give voice to the elite and the commoner, Northerner and Southerner, and the political interplay between them in the decade prior to the Civil War. Walther provides the reader with a year by year account of the major events that lead to the Civil War, summarizing the nation's political animosity that surrounded the compromise over slavery, giving special attention to the sectional ideologies that reinforced people's lives in both northern and southern regions. Walther does not attempt to break new ground with a major thesis on the destruction of the union, but rather provide an encapsulating view of the most significant events that shaped this country in the decade prior to the Civil War.

Walther begins the book with an outstanding prelude to the election of 1852, revealing the cords of influence and discontent preceding Pierce's landslide victory over Winfield Scott. He further discusses the emergence of the Free Soil Party and the political associations resulting from the intense feelings surrounding the Fugitive Slave law. In all of this, he reveals the role of literature as a primary factor shaping political alignments and influencing the mood of the nation. Harriett Beecher Stowe's monumental work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, provided a northern depiction of the peculiar institution and helped rally many to the abolitionist cause, as Stowe herself stepped outside the proper sphere for women and tied together the struggle for anti-slavery and women's rights. In the South, Louisa McCord responded by publishing *Enfranchisement for Women*, defending the home as the proper sphere for women to use their influence, believing that enfranchisement unnecessary for proper women. After the election

of 1852, Walther offers a snapshot of the social atmosphere in the North, immediately preceding Pierce's presidency, and then moves into a broader picture of the administration's embracing of manifest destiny and commercial expansion. Here the author is excellent at revealing the impact of manifest destiny for United States relations with Japan, the re-emergence of Texas's nemesis Santa Anna, filibustering activity, and the railroad boom. The reader though is left to wonder about the American Indian's in this drama, for their story is untold in Walther's account.

With the nation embracing westward expansion, and experiencing a temporary reprieve from the dividing force of slavery in 1852-53, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 refueled the fires of national discontent. Here Walther is at his best as he provides detail surrounding the support and opposition to the act, and the heated political climate that emerged over westward expansion. For example, the author furnishes an account of southern political reaction to Charles Sumner's constant attack on slavery and the fugitive slave law. On page 50, he refers to Clement C. Clay of Alabama who castigated Sumner as a leper, a serpent, and a filthy reptile.' Clay added that Sumner ought to be relegated to the nadir of social degradation which he merits.' Such words would never be uttered in the halls of Congress today, and Walther's outstanding use of quotes throughout the book brings the political sphere to life for the reader, revealing a time when politics actually meant something to individuals.

Moving on to the account of 1856, Walther expounds upon the pro and anti-slavery agitation, in the political and social spheres, that arose in the attempt to capture control of the Kansas territory. It is here, that the author illuminates an often overlooked topic, the southern fear of northern conspiracy. Southerners, Walther writes on page 95, 'bashed the wage system of labor in the north that they believed enslaved white men, and transformed entire poor white families into hirelings.' For southerners, the system of wage labor appeared more of a degradation to society than that of slave labor. In his discussion of the events shaping 1856, Walther exposes the parallel between events in Kansas and Latin America with a discussion of William Walker's filibustering attempts in Nicaragua. While Walker's filibustering did impact national politics, as he fought for official recognition consequently leaving the north more leery of a growing slave power, the attempt to continually connect Kansas with Nicaragua throughout the monograph is slightly overdone, and the reader would have benefited more from a short treatment of Walker's filibustering, in the same manner that the author treats his discussion of the Mormons.

For the year 1857, the author provides an account and analysis of the Dred Scott case. Furthermore, he does a superb job of revealing the nuances of pro-slavery ideology that emerged, and gives weight to the influence of George Fitzhugh and Josiah Nott and how literature held sway on southern ideology. One might question though this impact beyond the literate elite in society. Nevertheless, Walther is excellent at capturing numerous events and topics normally overlooked, and placing them in the mainstream of current events, revealing their significance to both northern and southern society. For example, in his discussion of the Church of Latter Day Saints, Walther argues on page 132, that the fight against them proved to be one of the last resources of national unity prior to the Civil War. Both the North and the South opposed the Mormon adoption of polygamy, thus uniting the sections against a common enemy they drove west. In his tale of the Mormons, Walther provides a good account of the Mountain Meadows Massacre that will interest many readers. Though one might not agree with Walther's claims, especially portraying the Mormons as an entity of national unity, the author's fair treatment of both Northern and Southern interests and events is a strong point of this work, and must be applauded.

For 1858, Walther has selected to reveal the importance of the Lecompton Constitution to the national political scene. Once again, the author truly captures the importance of politics and political issues, and the extent individuals went to defend their beliefs. On February 4, as the U. S. House of Representatives debated the Kansas issue, tensions rose to the point that at least 30 congressmen actually came to blows in the House chamber. Once again, Walther does an outstanding job of relying on personal quotes from the political elite to bring the story alive, revealing to the reader that both the North and South held to their own brand of societal honor worthy of defending. Walther also provides the reader with a good discussion of John Brown and his vision for a new constitution and United States, and how Brown, in his effort to reform the country, attempted to incite a race war. Such bold strategies and moves also depict what some might see as the uglier side of our society. In fact, Walther does reveal that both North and South had no moral high horse to ride. Southerners continued breaking slave-trading laws, Northerners continued breaking the fugitive slave act at will, and the author successfully reveals the lawlessness that abounded in both sections prior to the Civil War. Walther continues his discussion of the abolitionist John Brown in chapter eight, covering 1859, to reveal the significance of this abolitionist. When Brown was hanged in his failed attempt to raid the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, to gain arms for

his abolitionist crusade, Northerners tagged Brown as a martyr, comparing him to Christ; while in the South, the John Brown raid only convinced Southerners to the reality of a Northern conspiracy. This depiction, in many ways, sums up the sectional attitudes of the decade.

Writing a sweeping account of an entire decade, especially such a critical one, and presenting it in a clear and concise way, is not an easy task. Thus, any criticism seems a little unjust. While Walther though does an outstanding job of bringing the past to life, at times his story appears to wander off into oblivion. In chapter four, for instance, he begins by describing the invasion of and initial chaos in Kansas and the growing slave power in the South, but then moves to a discussion of election stealing in Kansas, to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, to the Civil War in Nicaragua, to Frederick Douglass, to Berea College. At times, the transitions and organization in some chapters might lose the reader; more cogent sub-points within the topical discussion could have improved this. Furthermore, while the author seeks to give equal voice to the common man, barely a whisper is heard. One will realize from the very beginning that this book is a primarily an account of the elite white males and the political sphere they resided in and controlled, for academics familiar with the author's previous works, this comes as no surprise. More disturbing for this reviewer, is that Walther presents slavery as a monolithic institution, shaping Anglo society in the same manner across the South. The nuances of the slave system over place and time affected whites û their outlook, ideology, and reactions û differently. This is an important point for a deeper understanding of the political climate that he seeks to discuss.

All criticism aside, Walther's writing is filled with personal quotes and short narratives that bring the 1850s alive. For example, when one of John Brown's cohorts was killed, the local citizens cut off his ears for souvenirs, dragged his body through the streets, and allowed hogs to devour the corpse û and the reader can almost sense they are one of the bystanders. When he offers his account of the chaos that often erupted in the House and Senate, the reader will feel as if he or she is actually sitting in the gallery watching Preston Brooks cane Charles Sumner. The ability to capture the reader's attention and illuminate the 1850s is a gift that Walther possesses, and one of the strengths of this book. For those interested in learning more about this critical decade, especially political events, Walther provides a selected bibliographical essay. **The Shattering of the Union** presents an excellent view of the 1850s that will benefit undergraduate students and teachers at all levels.

Clayton E. Jewett is an Adjunct Professor of History at Austin Community College. He is the author of Texas in the Confederacy: An Experiment in Nation Building (1992) and Slavery in the South (1994). Jewett is currently working on the memoirs of Confederate politician Williamson Simpson Oldham.