Don't Hurry Me Down to Hades: The Civil War in the Words of Those Who Lived It

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Review

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Ural, Susannah J. *Don't Hurry Me Down to Hades: The Civil War in the Words of Those Who Lived It*. Osprey Publishing, \$25.95 ISBN 9781849085908

Voices of War Brought to Life

Through the use of rich primary sources, Susannah J. Ural has woven the complex story of the U.S Civil War into an engaging narrative of social and military history. Ural succeeds because she anchors events to a core set of families, North and South, often juxtaposing perspectives of the same event. Taken largely from published collections and archival materials available through the Internet, many of the sources will be familiar to scholars. Her contribution rests in her skill at weaving so many voices into a rich and highly readable volume.

By crafting episodes, where she pauses for several pages to re-create the context of person, place, and event, Ural joins together a fast-paced narrative with analysis. In examining the western theater, for example, she devotes twelve pages to the Battle of Shiloh. She starts by introducing the generals, but then expands on the experiences of Willie Shepherd. Shepherd, a Chicago bookkeeper, marvelously captured the chaos of battle, the ensuing carnage, and even the growing Union hostility toward southern civilians. Ural's analysis deepens as she reviews the contests for control of the battle's narrative after 1862, particularly among surviving Union generals who aimed to valorize their own roles and explain their early confusion and losses. Her treatment quickly but smoothly shifts gears to an analysis of the death of Confederate Sam Todd, Mary Todd Lincoln's brother, wonderfully illustrating the chaos that occurred after the last shots were fired, the persistent anxiety of those at home when news of a battle circulated, and the tangled loyalties of Americans along the border. Ural is at her best in sketches such as this one where she crafts a coherent narrative with multiple voices and adds a brief layer of interpretation.

Due to the sheer volume of Civil War primary sources, trade-offs must occur in coverage at every turn. While an impressive array of politicians, officers, soldiers and kin appear, the inevitable bias of letters and diaries is toward middle- and upper-class whites on both sides of the conflict. The orientation toward families torn apart by the war makes for a dramatic narrative, but sometimes elides other motives, such as a soldier's political sensibilities and the evolution of morale, particularly as companies and regiments experienced withering losses. Instead, we hear relatively uncomplicated and unchanging avowals of duty among combatants. Even matters that strike closer to the domestic circle, particularly piety, and how it may have sustained or challenged loved ones on the home front and battlefield make only peripheral appearances in the quotations selected.

Other trade-offs in terms of coverage and analysis seem more perplexing. Just as the war hits its darkest hour in 1864, at precisely the moment when Northern and Southern families and politicians would have been asking themselves vexing questions about the war's strategies and purpose, the book's pace accelerates. We see some internal cracks in the Confederacy with bread riots and runaways slaves, but the repercussions of those changes remain vague. The reasons behind Northerners' doubts, particularly the Copperhead movement, and ultimate resolve remain even murkier. The conclusion, a lengthy portrait of Lewis Powell's assassination attempt on Secretary of State William Seward, while dramatic, seems both too narrow and too tidy for a war with such far-reaching social consequences. The political and social chaos of Reconstruction do not cloud the horizon.

Ural treads lightly into historiography, allowing her subjects to speak on their own behalf. When she engages in historiographic debates, as on p. 154 where she contends that southern civilian demands for wartime assistance did not signal flagging southern nationalism but rather "that promises made by county, state, and federal governments to entice their husbands to enlist must be kept," her brief but welcome exegesis helps the reader grasp the stakes of the events recounted by those who experienced them. Even more of the same, whether done sparingly in the text or more rigorously in notes or a bibliographic essay, would be welcome. While the work contains a useful profile of the key families, notes, and a brief bibliography, tracking down particular quotations can be challenging on occasion. Such is the case for Henry Morton Stanley of Arkansas, the Confederate counterpart to Willie Shepherd at Shiloh.

These trade-offs—whether of source, analysis, or historiography—no doubt illustrate the inherent challenges of taking on the daunting task of synthesizing primary sources from the Civil War into a coherent narrative of manageable length. Susannah Ural succeeds admirably in fashioning this quick reading and engaging eyewitness account of the Civil War, though greater attention to these variables could enhance the sense of contingency in the narrative.

Scott Stephan, Associate Professor of History at Ball State University, has published Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South and is currently working on a study of evangelical newspapers in the Civil War era.