

The Civil War in 50 Objects

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Recommended Citation

Rudy, John (2013) "The Civil War in 50 Objects," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.3.18

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss3/17>

Review

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Summer 2013

Holzer, Harold *The Civil War in 50 Objects*. Viking Press, \$36.00 ISBN 978-0-670-01463-7

A Material Look at the Civil War

In the late 19th century, curio-cabinet museums lurked in the back rooms of shops and pubs throughout America. They enticed patrons in to view wares or down a stiff drink. Mostly made up of relics from the rubbish bin or the wood pile, the cases usually boasted having the real axes used by George Washington or a sliver of wood from the “true cross.” But invariably, like the tourist traps that dotted Route 66 a century later, the relics were a letdown, obvious fakes and frauds.

But Harold Holzer does not disappoint like the curio-cabinets of old. What he presents in his *The Civil War in 50 Objects* are pieces of an American true cross, relics from the 19th century’s quintessential passion play. Holzer, who haunts the halls of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City when he is not studying Lincoln and the war he spearheaded, has amassed an impressive assemblage of objects which take the reader through the course of the war from its inception to its ultimate outcomes. Using the copious collections of the New-York Historical Society, Holzer weaves a tale which hits the war’s high points and deepest depths.

Holzer’s work might remind some of the published exhibit catalogs which larger museums tend to publish after a major temporary exhibit has been installed. Like those coffee-table epics, Holzer’s book features full-color images of all of the selected artifacts and documents. But where exhibit catalogs often present prints and images unadorned, Holzer has built his exhibit in the book, a portable museum for the Civil War enthusiast.

The audience for this book is firmly in the realm of the popular. The scholar will not necessarily find new evidence or unique accounts to pour over, but there

is plenty sprinkled throughout Holzer's book which might surprise and astound those who do not spend countless hours each week pouring over diaries and letters for new evidence about the war.

Holzer is able to offer new angles, particularly through juxtaposition. At times, he utilizes objects in succession to show differing perspectives and shifting meanings. When tackling the New York Draft Riots, the reader is taken through the hot first minutes of the fray thanks to a Draft Wheel from New York's Lower East Side, the catalyst for outrage and bloodshed. But by choosing the next object wisely, a charred Bible recovered from the smoldering ruins of the New York Colored Orphan's Asylum, Holzer is able to shift the discussion just as the anger of the rioters turned: from Uncle Sam to Uncle Tom, from conscription to the city's African-American population.

Holzer is at his best when he is discussing the plight of slaves and newly freed people throughout the work. The objects which touch on the war's freedom narrative, a pair of iron shackles which held a young enslaved black child's hands, a medal presented to the United States Colored Troops by Benjamin Butler, a sketch of Confederate President Jefferson Davis' slaves finding their freedom in Federal lines, are scattered throughout the book and offer a strong undercurrent highlighting the war's arch toward freedom. Holzer's treatment of the *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* sketch in particular, and discussion of the process by which the sensitive and stately pencil drawing morphed into a more racially stereotypical yet still potent symbol of the Emancipation Proclamation in action, is a masterful example of using one simple piece of evidence to explain a larger whole.

In the end, this is the ultimate strength of Holzer's work. The book is deeply resource-based, much like the modern field of public history. Instead of a now-placid battlefield or the crumbling walls of an historic home, Holzer uses these artifacts from New-York Historical Society's collection as his landscape. His work is not comprehensive in its details, but it neither intends to be nor needs to be. Holzer covers the whole of the war, from Eastern Theatre to Western, from the Upper South to the depths of the Black Belt and back to the streets of New York. But he does it in a way which will not be overwhelming for a casual reader.

Holzer approaches the war from a perspective of meaning and impact on average Americans, choosing objects which will have deep emotional impacts on

the reader. The assassination of Lincoln finds Holzer pairing the poetry of Walt Whitman with a touching and heart-rending framed sprig of greenery from Lincoln's New York funeral bier, desiccated with age but amazingly vibrant when paired with the Brooklyn poet's words. Deep emotion meaning, and not simply the rote facts of Lincoln's long journey from Washington City to Springfield, Illinois, is Holzer's true aim. And that meaningful emotional motive shines through nearly every artifact in the book.

That is not to say the scholar will not enjoy Holzer's work. The researcher will find a few particularly useful sources to mine, particularly the accompanying list of objects, most of which include accession numbers and details which will help if those documents might warrant a look from a keen eye for other projects. Holzer's bibliography reads like an essential reading list for the serious scholar.

But the style is not bogged down in too much dialectic and historiography. Popular readers will likely read the book just as easily in the insomniac's late-night hours or in a comfortable beach chair as they will with a highlighter or notebook at hand.

The Civil War in 50 Objects offers an opportunity to hold a museum exhibit in your hand. And unlike the curio-cabinet museums of old, Holzer's book is filled with pieces of the true cross, relics dredged up from an American sepulcher. *50 Objects* is an enjoyable and meaningful trip through the American Civil War, from cause to consequences, from beginning to end.

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