

History Is Not Confined to the Ivory Tower

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Editorial

HISTORY IS NOT CONFINED TO THE IVORY TOWER

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“The past is a foreign country,” is so often repeated that it is rarely attributed to L.P. Hartley, the British novelist who coined the phrase. The line has entered the realm of proverb because it offers a succinct reminder to exercise caution in interpreting the past, to remember context and avoid the presentism disdained by professional historians. Yet the caution in Hartley’s quote carries its own risks. If interpreting the past through the lens of the present is the cardinal sin of the historian’s craft, surely rendering the past so distant as to seem irrelevant follows closely behind. Or, to put that caution about the past in literary terms, “it’s not even past.” History is not merely a different version of our modern world, but history is never far from the world we live in. The Fall 2015 issue of the *Civil War Book Review* is replete with the familiar, finely honed scholarship our contributors take pride in and, more than usual I think, full of the kind of unexpected connections that remind us how much of our world is not of our own making.

Historical roots run particularly deep in this issue. Adam Pratt reviews *Jacksonland*, from NPR’s Steve Inskeep, which locates the development of the Deep South—so significant in American history from the mid-nineteenth century on—in 1830s and the administration of the U.S.’s seventh president. Christopher Cameron’s *To Plead Our Own Cause*, reviewed by Andrew N. Wegmann, demonstrates the vitality of African American abolitionism, independent of white sympathizers, decades before David Walker’s famous *An Appeal to Coloured Citizens of the World*. Stephen A. West offers a look at Gregory P. Downs’ much-anticipated *After Appomattox*, which argues that the Civil War, in reality, extended years beyond the Confederacy’s military surrender, through years of military occupation and southern resistance, reshaping American war powers and the constitutional landscape. Calvin Schermerhorn’s *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism*, reviewed by Frank J. Byrne, connects the foundations of the modern U.S. capitalist economy with the tremendous economic impact of slavery in the United States.

While slavery and expansion into Native American lands shaped the development of the United States over the nineteenth century, James L. Huston discusses in our author interview the development of slavery and the southern plantation complex. The explanation lies with landholding patterns established in England even before European colonial exploration. Huston's latest book, *The British Gentry, the Southern Planter, and the Northern Family Farmer*, reviewed in this issue by Michael Frawley, demonstrates a contrast between northern and southern agriculture that explains in concrete terms increasing sectional antagonism. Along the way, Huston upsets many narratives about the economic prospects of slavery, the tenets of free labor and southern republicanism, and the coming of the Civil War.

Also engaging longstanding narratives about the war is the subject of Frank Williams' latest column. *The War Worth Fighting*, an insightful collection of essays edited by Stephen D. Engle and featuring preeminent scholars such as Orville Vernon Burton, Jennifer L. Weber, and Kate Masur, analyzes to what extent the war was the result of a "blundering generation" that traumatized southern economic development and American race relations with an unnecessary conflict. Though professional historical consensus has mostly abandoned this old hypothesis, its staying power in American society begs for continued engagement from professional scholars, and Engle's work delivers.

From James Huston's work taking readers as far back as 1066 to explain 1861, to Gregory Downs finding the war continuing after 1865, creative approaches offer long timelines and unexpected connections that bring new insight. Perhaps the most surprising connections in this issue come from Michael Taylor's latest "Civil War Treasures" column, finding former Confederates discussing the fate of their lost cause while steaming unknowingly towards their own aboard the *Titanic*. Popular film depictions of the elegant British liner's tragic voyage, as Taylor points out, ought to include a few more southern accents among the ship's famous passengers. As always, this overview barely scratches the surface. Peg Lamphier reviews a new novel about the Civil War's own tragic sinking, the deadly explosion of the *Sultana*, and Brannon Costello looks at how dynamic media can add emotional weight to the horrors of war.

Finally, Robert J. Cook provides a comparative look at the Civil War centennial and sesquicentennial commemorations. Finding a sesquicentennial that shared little of the problems, but unfortunately relatively less interest, compared to the 1960s, Cook demonstrates a common thread in this history of

memory, that our recollections of the past are shaped by the needs and concerns of the present. The sesquicentennial's conclusion coincided with racially motivated violence and reignited debates over the Confederate battle flag and other symbols of the Confederacy. Four years of scholarly discussion and quiet commemoration suddenly changed as the Civil War was once again thrust into the spotlight of current American affairs. Cook shows us that history is not confined to the ivory tower, that learning is today no longer the privilege of gentility, as imagined by antebellum plantation owners. Crucially, our work is public, it is for our students, our readers, and our society, that we can interpret the past with discipline and care, and understand the world we have inherited as we fashion the world we make.

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