

### On Old Facts and New Understandings

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## Editorial

### ON OLD FACTS AND NEW UNDERSTANDINGS

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I was perusing a garage sale not long ago when among the antique Tupperware and forgotten cassette tapes I came across a set of encyclopedias. It was a grand old set, complete, with bindings meant to look substantial and authoritative just sitting on a shelf. Thirty years ago they probably cost a considerable sum. An orange sticker noted \$7.00 for the set. My wife and I deliberated briefly on whether we could make some use of them, really more than anything out of a sense of responsibility to rescue some old books from the recycle bin. Of course, they were too outdated to serve their original purpose and would take up entirely too much space to justify. But the owner noticed our pause and decided to try to sell us on the set. With the air of someone letting us in on the truth of a great misconception, she uttered a phrase guaranteed to make a historian blanch, “they’re still good, just facts, after all it’s not like history changes!” Thank goodness that as with human understanding of psychology, medicine, or economics, reexamining the past *does* continually produce new knowledge. Preparing this Winter 2016 issue reminded me of that exchange because of the astounding rate at which our sense of history—events studied time and again—evolves, and also because of the challenge the exchange suggests of communicating the latest findings to a broader public.

The works in this issue meet both of these challenges head-on. In Charles Dew’s review of Brent Tarter’s latest book *Daydreams and Nightmares*, an accessibly slender but incisive look at one Virginia family, Tarter demonstrates the disruption of secession and war even for people who tried their best to adjust to the political and military fortunes of their communities. In the realm of strategy, John Beeler reviews Robert Browning’s in-depth research on the Union naval effort and the West Gulf Blockading Squadron, *Lincoln’s Trident*. In the Gulf, Browning finds considerable holes in a blockade composed of traditional sailing vessels, rather than a near-impenetrable ironclad stranglehold on Confederate shipping. For military specialists and general Civil War readers alike, the Overland Campaign and the Battle of Petersburg might seem familiar studies, but *Cold Harbor to the Crater*, a new volume from UNC Press’ Military

Campaigns of the Civil War series, edited by Gary Gallagher and Caroline Janney and reviewed here by Christian Keller, solidifies connections between the end of the Overland Campaign and the famous Petersburg siege.

Perhaps no aspect of sectional crisis and the Civil War has been more researched than slavery, and arguably no aspect has added more to understanding the nation's past. This issue offers two important new looks at how slavery ended, a process that took nearly a century. Patrick Rael's *Eighty-Eight Years* and Ira Berlin's *The Long Emancipation*, reviewed together in this issue by Edward Ayers, provide differing perspectives on this process. Rael reexamines the oft-cited fact that slavery was not unique to the United States, and instead highlights the globally anomalous place that slavery held in American society, which caused it to be one of the very last nations on earth to disband the institution. In this context, American slavery's eventual end may have been certain, but the manner and duration of its demise was highly particular to the U.S. Berlin, our guest for this issue's author interview, shows even greater levels of contingency. *The Long Emancipation* emphasizes the free and enslaved African Americans at the heart of the matter, and how their unending efforts—often all but alone—had the effect of eroding slavery even as they achieved gains and suffered setbacks at an uneven and uncertain pace.

If slavery is the most studied aspect of the era, the Civil War of course also provides the most studied U.S. president. Yet as with the other projects in this issue, work on Lincoln offers improved understanding of a man cited at nearly all levels of American society. Harold Holzer—no stranger to Lincoln—and Norton Garfinkle recover a Lincoln deeply concerned with economic justice in Frank J. Williams' review of *A Just and Generous Nation*. With the coming end of slavery and the fight for civic inclusion for African Americans, Lincoln understood that legal equality was all but meaningless if lack of access stymied economic opportunity for Americans, black or white.

The new work inspired by the old facts of the Civil War certainly does not end with professional historians. In this issue's feature column, novelist David Madden calls for a renewed look at some of the classics of Civil War fiction, and encourages the new approaches taken by younger generations of writers. Rather than rehashing the themes of glory and loss associated with some of the best-known novels on the era, these works range geographically from the borderlands to the home front, and thematically from the brutality of the war in its time to madness and Civil War memory in modern times.

Finally, in this issue's "Civil War Treasures" column, Jessica Lacher-Feldman reminds readers that the words and images of old histories can offer us new insight when read with care and creativity. Her examination of an impressive collection of children's literature published on the subject between the 1880s and 1930s reveals Civil War history in its infancy, when each story and image elicited connections for readers to parents, grandparents, acquaintances and friends. Published as histories of the recent past, these books over time became artifacts in their own right.

Naturally, the rest of the issue is replete with a variety of works. Clifton Ellis gives us a look at Joy Giguere's new book on the memorial architecture so common in Civil War era cemeteries North and South. Thomas C. Mackey takes on George Kateb's new meditation on Abraham Lincoln's political philosophy, and Mark Cheatham reviews a new volume of essays developing our understanding of political parties leading up to the war. Each, I hope readers will agree, taking up the challenge of renewing our understanding of old facts and old legends.