

The Importance of Peer Review

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Editorial

EDITORIAL: THE IMPORTANCE OF PEER REVIEW

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It is a great honor for me to be able to formally introduce myself to our readers. The past few months have been a busy time, many of us in the middle of our fall semester. I have been lucky to take over the *Civil War Book Review* with the support of the staff at LSU Special Collections, and with the journal having been handed off to me in such excellent shape by our previous editor, Michael Frawley. These past few months have also driven home to me the staggering volume of excellent scholarship being produced on the era, and the many more questions uncovered with each work.

This Issue's featured reviews cover a broad array of Civil War scholarship, from religion and antislavery to politics to memory. Margot Minardi reviews *Quakers and Abolition*, edited by Brycchan Carey and Geoffrey Plank, a collection of essays adding valuable nuance to the well-known connection between the Friends, antislavery, and abolition. John David Smith examines Brian Wills' revisit of Nathan Bedford Forrest and Fort Pillow in his review of *The River Was Dyed with Blood*. Work on the memory and interpretation of the war and its battlefields focuses on the role of the National Park Service in J. Christian Spielvogel's *Interpreting Sacred Ground*, reviewed by Mark Ehlers. Finally, Kevin Adams reviews Jonathan W. White's critical reexamination of the role Union soldiers played in Republican victory in the election of 1864.

As always, this issue of *CWBR* also contains four feature columns, some familiar and some new. Hans Rasmussen offers a look at the plight of unemployed Confederate veterans in this issue's *Civil War Treasures* column. While the importance of the Civil War to creating some of the first social security programs in American history with veteran's pensions is well known, resultant focus on Union veterans overshadows the experience of Southern veterans, who could hardly expect the largesse of the government they had rebelled against. Rasmussen's column reminds us how different the two group's experiences could be. In *A Look at Lincoln*, Frank Williams offers a look at Harold Holzer's work on Lincoln's use of the press. Our author interview this

issue features William S. King, independent scholar and author of *To Raise Up a Nation*.

It is a time of transition for *CWBR*, not only as we change editors, but as the Sesquicentennial begins winding down. In response, this issue debuts a new column opportunity for the *Review*, space to continue our role as a facilitator for dialogue among the best scholars on the era, as we see in James Oakes' and Chandra Manning's conversation following last issue's review of *The Scorpion's Sting*. I hope this space will, when appropriate, continue to offer a forum for fruitful discussion in future issues.

Finally, to return to the title of this editorial, the past few months has also served reminder to the crucial role of peer review. Little more can be said, at this point, about the flaws in the now-infamous (and retracted) review of Edward Baptist's "*The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*" from the September issue of the *Economist*. The review's critique of Baptist for failing to be "objective" in his treatment of the system of human enslavement suggests much for the ongoing need for scholarship such as we see in this issue. The almost universal backlash against the review offers hope that such scholarship does have an impact. Yet the *Economist* debacle also offers a reminder of the importance of peer review and accountability, of dialogue and of the role of publications like *Civil War Book Review*. Such publications not only provide a forum for dialogue and review, but a window to the ever-evolving context of published scholarship. In short, they are the crucial medium for discussion and for holding elements of that discussion accountable to historical research.

The most troubling aspect of the *Economist* review is, of course, its lack of awareness about its assertions. Though the reviewer is correct in saying that Baptist is uncontroversial in connecting slavery to the growth of American power, the review misses by interpreting Baptist's argument as a mere attack on "traditional" elements of American success. The review then names several largely out-of-date explanations, overlooking that the contribution of Baptist's emphasis on "calibrated pain" returns emphasis to the human terms of slavery. While accusing Baptist of dismissing economic causation, the reviewer seems unaware of how often economic abstraction has been abused in the service of slavery apology. The review goes so far as to rehash the well-debunked Dunning School argument that the economic importance of slaves precluded serious maltreatment. Suffice to say, closer familiarity with current scholarship might

have done wonders for the author's problematic conclusions.

As troubling as the *Economist* review's assertions, however less discussed, is its fundamental lack of accountability. Entering the field of peer review demands academic thoughtfulness and respect. Knowing that our peers will hold our assertions accountable to historical scholarship is part of what safeguards the integrity of the field. The *Economist* review, in contrast, is an anonymous jab. Such anonymity subverts the very purpose of peer review. It also distorts dialogue, replacing the fruitful discussion of peer review with clumsy, antagonistic complaint followed by an equally clumsy retraction.

Certainly, pressures beyond avoiding accountability promote such short-form anonymity. As information becomes increasingly accessible and instantaneous, institutions seek flexibility in creating that information in a competitive marketplace. Anonymous entries written by large staffs are one strategy for such flexibility. I do not claim to know what pressures prevailed on the *Economist* in running their review as it read. As a quarterly journal, *Civil War Book Review* makes no claims on having mastered the furious pace of today's information economy. Yet, as an open, online journal, *CWBR* also strives for a balance between making good scholarship rapidly accessible to the broadest possible audience, and facilitating the steady peer review necessary for such scholarship. Ever appreciative of you, our readers, we shall continue to strive for that balance.