

A Changing Wind: Commerce & Conflict in Civil War Atlanta

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Review

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Venet, Wendy *A Changing Wind: Commerce & Conflict in Civil War Atlanta*. Yale University Press, \$30.00 ISBN 9780300192162

The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of Atlanta

The role of Atlanta in the Civil War looms large in American history. When the city surrendered to Union forces in September 1864, the Confederacy lost a critical node for communications, transport, and manufacturing. This strategic significance coupled with a symbolic one; as one of the most rapidly growing urban centers in the South, Atlanta offered an important, if fleeting, example of how the Confederacy might actually improvise a thriving economy. Embellished over the years by the cinematic portrayal in *Gone With the Wind*, Atlanta's fall took on legendary proportions. The city's post-war rise as the leading city in the New South provided even more fodder for mythmaking. Atlanta, which did not even exist in 1830, had become the quintessential southern city a half-century later.

In her study of Atlanta during the Civil War Era, Wendy Hammond Venet explores the "extraordinary challenges, great upheaval, and both triumph and tragedy" (4) for the city's inhabitants. *A Changing Wind: Commerce & Conflict in Civil War Atlanta* peels back the layers of myth and replaces it with a solid account of the city's experience, as told by the residents themselves. There are few surprises or startling revelations here; *A Changing Wind's* great strength is its close narrative account of Atlanta in during its notable rise during the late antebellum period, its spectacular growth and destruction over the course of the Civil War, and its rebirth as the first city of the New South in the aftermath of that devastation.

Venet begins with a discussion of Atlanta's rapid rise as a new railroad community during the 1840s and 1850s. Ambitious structures like the Trout House, a luxury hotel built in 1854, symbolized the city's aspiration to become a center of commerce and culture. By the time of the secession crisis, Atlantans

referred to their hometown as the “Gate City to the South.” The outbreak of hostilities in 1861 offered new challenges for this goal, as Atlanta’s business and manufacturing interests scrambled to aid in the Confederate war effort. Venet’s storyline follows a straight chronological path, but she also takes time to introduce readers to some of Atlanta’s distinctive residents. There is, for example, Thomas “Blind Tom” Wiggins, an enslaved African-American pianist, whose concerts offered themes of patriotism to soothe white audiences throughout the Civil War. More prominent figures such as General William T. Sherman make an appearance here as well, but the real value of *A Changing Wind* is found in Venet’s careful reconstruction of the wartime experience of everyday Atlantans. The description of the military campaign to capture Atlanta, for example, appears in real time. Venet offers a vivid description of the battle for the city from the perspective of its terrified civilian population. As Sherman’s forces approached, the city fell into a kind of lawless state that the diarist Kate Cummings described as “the most wicked place in the world.” (151) The deep immersion into the day by day unfolding of the Civil War in the Gate City showcases Venet’s skills as a narrative historian. And although we know the outcome of the struggle, her depiction of the panicked city injects a sense of contingency and urgency rarely found in historical accounts of the Civil War.

In the end, though, what did it all mean? Most wartime depictions of Atlanta focus on the devastation of the city, but Venet suggests that Atlanta resumed its prewar trajectory after 1865. “While it might appear that they gambled and lost when they cast their lot with the secessionists,” she argues of Atlanta’s entrepreneurs, “most of them landed on their feet after the war, and so did their city.” (180) New symbols of prosperity eclipsed the antebellum ones—the sprawling Kimball House replaced the Trout House as Atlanta’s premier hotel and social center—and the Gate City quickly assumed its position as the New South’s leading city. It is a rather odd ending to a book that wants to focus on the extraordinary events of the Civil War, and yet in the telling of those events that ordinary Atlantans endured, *A Changing Wind* reminds us to pause amidst Atlanta’s relentless quest to be the city of the future and remember the remarkable nature of its past.

Sean Patrick Adams is Associate Professor and Chair of the History Department at the University of Florida. His most recent book is Home Fires: How Americans Kept Warm in the Nineteenth Century (Johns Hopkins, 2014).