

Civil War Book Review

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The American Civil War: A Hands-On History

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Review

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Olsen, Christopher J. *The American Civil War: A Hands-On History*. Hill and Wang, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 9780809095386

Teaching the Civil War

A Hands-On Approach

When I began teaching the Civil War and Reconstruction, I vowed never to use a textbook. Surely, I reasoned, students should prefer a combination of primary sources and cutting-edge scholarship that can analyze or explain a few key issues. Then came the questions that I, a new Ph.D. with a dissertation on political history, dreaded: What time of the afternoon did Pickett's charge happen? Or even worse: When are we going to get to Chickamauga?

Such questions were posed by good students who wished to study the Civil War era because they liked military history. But they aroused in me a fear that I had not covered everything of importance because I did not know enough. So, I tried assigning a textbook.

Unfortunately, with Civil War texts the cure is worse than the problem. In going for coverage, one finds a marketplace full of aging, exorbitantly priced books. James M. McPherson's *Ordeal by Fire* remains eloquent, but the book, originally published in 1982, is getting long in the tooth. Further, the paperback version of that text costs over seventy dollars, and at 800 pages, students will have little time to read other material. David Herbert Donald is the lead author of another popular, massive, and expensive text, and he has enjoyed a distinguished career. Nevertheless, in spite of revisions, I do not feel comfortable assigning a work initially published by Donald's mentor, James G. Randall, seventy years ago. Lesley Gordon, Michl Fellman, and Daniel Sutherland's *This Terrible War* is relatively new, differs from older works on some interpretive questions and includes primary source readings. In spite of the differences, my students found it too expensive and lengthy.

Christopher Olsen's new book *The Civil War: A Hands-On History* offers one possible escape from the lengthy textbook. This brief synthesis touches of the sectional crisis, the war, and Reconstruction. It includes a selection of brief primary source documents, maps, and illustrations. Hill and Wang has priced the hard cover at an almost-reasonable thirty dollars, and hopefully the paper version will be cheaper still.

Olsen, an associate professor of history at Indiana State University, is the author of a well-received monograph, *Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi: Masculinity, Honor, and the Antiparty Tradition, 1830-1860* (2000). After producing such a tightly focused book, this is a marked departure for him. His book offers sound interpretations of the various issues at hand and reads smoothly. Wisely, he glides past some contentious issues among scholars, and does not claim that his interpretation of the period is definitive or unique. For instance, Olsen makes the potentially controversial argument that the . . . Second Party System of Whig and Democrat foundered initially over another potent issue of the 1850's: Nativism. Yet he prefaces the sentence with a nod to the current consensus that slavery extension ultimately brought on the Civil War . . . (43). He is wise to keep the emphasis on slavery, especially since anti-immigrant fear of Catholicism and antislavery hatred of urban Democratic voters were by no means mutually exclusive.

Olsen's work effectively handles political and military aspects of the Civil War era, and he frames the debate over slavery as the central point of contention. Women and the home front play a strong role, but overall the book gives short shrift to cultural, intellectual, and religious history. The author crafts a highly readable narrative, but by its very nature this project must omit much of the story. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Ralph Waldo Emerson are absent from the index, but few mainstream politicians or important generals are omitted.

Specialists may quibble over fine points. For example, Olsen often uses Southern interchangeably with Confederate. In fact, the two terms are not at all synonymous, as so many Missourians and fugitive slaves understood. Such confusion of terms leads Olsen to render Kentucky as a Northern state. Minor errors of fact creep in only rarely, most noticeably when Olsen confuses Jubal Early with Richard Ewell in his discussion of Gettysburg.

Overall, however, this book is a gem. Olsen's economy of language allows him to accomplish the impossible: he offers a readable overview of a massive field with minimal damage inflicted by his compression. While this book offers a wonderful introduction for the general reader, it also holds great value as a teaching tool.

Wallace Hettle is an associate professor of history at the University of Northern Iowa. He is the author of The Peculiar Democracy: Southern Democrats in Peace and Civil War (2001). He currently is working on a study of Stonewall Jackson's image in American culture.