

The Slaves' War: The Civil War in the Words of Former Slaves

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Review

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Ward, Andrew *The Slaves' War: The Civil War in the Words of Former Slaves*.
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The Voices of Slaves Speak on the Civil War

Of late Civil War historians have succeeded in balancing the attention they give to battle front and home front: it has become common fare not only to examine the relationship between civilians at home and the rank and file on the battlefield. In so doing groups previously marginalized or excluded from the battlefield and political salons now enjoy a more prominent place in accounts of the Civil War. Andrew Ward's *The Slaves' War: The Civil War in the Words of the Slaves* is a natural development in the ongoing effort to present the broadest picture of the nation's major and most defining military conflict.

Ward's goal is not merely to retell the familiar story of the war; instead, he attempts to shift both our vantage point and our understanding of the war from the familiar historical celebrities, and the obvious moral issues of slavery or freedom, wherein the enslaved appear as little more than objects and entirely lacking in ability to act independently or in any way shape significantly the war's conduct or its outcome. An event that so profoundly touched the lives of millions of enslaved people begs for more accounts of the Civil War that reveal the enslaved as not merely passively waiting for freedom but as instinctively political actors who wrestled with the meaning and potential of a war that pitted slaveholders against non-slaveholders, and held the promise of freedom or slavery in the balance.

The Slaves' War demonstrates what was perhaps not altogether surprising to slaveholders—the enslaved were ubiquitous. Everywhere the war was discussed, fought, analyzed, re-analyzed, cheered and damned, the enslaved were there or thereabout. As Ward makes clear, like the institution that imprisoned them, the enslaved were an integral part of life in the South, an inextricable component of

all the southern institutions—public and private. Intimately linked to the soldiers, sailors, and politicians of all ranks, the enslaved were a constant presence, witnessing much of everything that was said or read aloud. And, once fed into the infamous “slave grapevine,” the black community learned about the discussions taking place in the “Big House,” in the corridors of power, and around military campfires. Never the mere objects about which two mighty, white armies fought, seen through the eyes of the bondmen and women, the Civil War becomes in some ways a different war. The moral basis on which we have come to interpret the conflict becomes decidedly more complex and morally opaque.

For readers less familiar with detailed accounts of the Civil War, Ward escorts them through some of the events leading up to the war, the major battles and, finally, the freed peoples’ first experience of freedom. Wherever possible, he draws upon what is a disappointingly small arsenal of words and commentary from enslaved persons to reveal a variety of attitudes—some unexpectedly troubling—about slavery and freedom, slave masters and mistresses, and Yankees and Confederates. Despite the limited sources, Ward is successful in locating the enslaved at center stage as narrators, actors, and critics.

Somewhat disappointing for this reader, and again constrained by the available sources, is the primacy of “testimonies” from black people who were closest to men such as Robert E. Lee or Jefferson Davis, the very actors who Ward’s work seeks to push gently from the forefront of the Civil War story. Unfortunately, reliance on these sources leaves the traditional narrative largely unchallenged and unchanged. The recollection of Jim Parke, Lee’s “eighteen year old servant,” that in the early days of April 1861, the great General “couldn’t sleep much of nights” with his mind so “full of troubles,” serves merely to reinforce the Old Man’s legend while revealing little about Parke and others like him (39). Similarly, Isaac Stier, a Mississippi slave, who presumably knew Davis, concluded that had the Confederate President not been so “mulish” he would have accepted “the proposition Mr. Abe Lincoln made him” and then slavery “would have lasted always” (20).

Of course there were many thousands of ordinary enslaved workers who performed the back breaking labor that fueled the Confederate war effort. The testimonies of enslaved and former slaves that Ward manages to weave into his tale of war reveal the vast array of services the enslaved people were obliged to perform on both the home and the battle fronts: from protecting the lives of

white people and their property placed in their care, to risking their own lives and those of their families to escape the institution of slavery. Young men like Brandon Johnson (who) recalled being “kept working hard digging pits and making forts” around Vicksburg, and, on the other side of the barricades was fugitive turned nurse, Rose Russell, who “waded through blood and slime to carry wounded soldiers to a comfortable place to rest and die” (123).

Historians will be disturbed by some liberties taken by Ward. First and foremost he relies heavily on the oral interviews of former slaves, conducted in the 1920s and 1930s, the vast majority of whom, lacking sophisticated literacy skills, were required to rely on their aging memory to report their Civil War experiences. These people, some 70 or 80 years removed from slavery, were interviewed by government employees, very late in life and in the midst of an awful economic depression (304). These sources, although increasingly relied on by historians, are seldom used without some preliminary discussion as to their provenance, value, and the need for careful use. Ward relegates this important discussion to an appendix. In addition, in an attempt to undo the amateurish attempts of the largely white interviewers to produce “authentic Negro dialect,” whenever he deemed it necessary, he engages in a “cleaning up” process to alter the style in which these documents originally appeared. As he writes, he is concerned “not so much with how they [former slaves] may have sounded but with what they said” (306). Ward’s goal here, he tells us, is less to produce good history as it is to create “the sensation of listening respectfully and without mediation while an ancestor is speaking” (306).

Ward goes out even further on a limb in deciding to exclude the troublesome but pervasive “N” word. Wishing to shed “more light than heat” he writes that in expunging the word he removes “one more layer of fog, one more level of static, through which to learn about slavery and the war” (305). Ward justifies this troublesome intrusion on the grounds on the same grounds he uses for cleaning up the dialect of slave testimonies. There is much to admire in a work that seeks to put front and center the slaves’ perspective, voice, ideology, and ultimately, analysis, of what is still the major war and defining era in American history--the Civil War. *The Slaves' War* is a fine book that broadens and deepens the historical canvass of the war. It will serve as a useful accompaniment to more traditional accounts of the American Civil War history.

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Antebellum South Carolina (1997), and edited Working Toward Freedom: Slave Society and Domestic Economy in the American South (1994). His current project examines the industrial activities of black Southerners during the Civil War.