

1861: The Civil War Awakening

Edward L. Ayers

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. (2011) "1861: The Civil War Awakening," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 3 , Article 36.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss3/36>

Review

Ayers, Edward L.

Summer 2011

Goodheart, Adam *1861: The Civil War Awakening*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$28.65
ISBN 978-1-4000-4015-5

Narrating the Human Side of War

This is an elegant, engaging, and unusual book. Goodheart, a journalist, is a strong and vivid writer, using a few highly detailed characters and scenes to convey a larger perspective. Goodheart has researched the people and topics he covers with impressive thoroughness, mining sources of all kinds to good effect. The book tells an encouraging story of the Civil War, portraying what Goodheart calls an “awakening” across the North in early 1861.

Dedicating his book to an immigrant ancestor, Goodheart offers a powerful story that affirms what is best about the United States. “The war described here was not just a Southern rebellion,” he writes, “but a nationwide revolution—fought even from within the seceding states—for freedom. And while the South’s rebellion failed, with the Confederacy fated to become a historical dead end, this revolution—our second as a people—reinvented America, and a century and a half later still defines much of our national character.” Goodheart believes that the Civil War “swept away” an “older America, a nation stranded halfway between its love of freedom and its accommodation of slavery” (18).

Americans have lost this sense of heroism in our understanding of the Civil War, Goodheart thinks, our books and documentaries dwelling on “the blood and filth, the bloating bodies on the fields of Antietam, the sons and brothers lost.” It has become “intellectually fashionable,” he argues, to emphasize the “casual racism of everyone from lowly infantrymen up to President Lincoln himself; to say that the Emancipation Proclamation was simply a convenient military stratagem; to repeat the truism that the Civil War began not as a war to abolish slavery but as a war to save the Union.” Goodheart will have nothing of it,

arguing that people on both sides “did understand it as a war against slavery, even before it began.” It was not a war for abolition, he quickly acknowledges, but simply that many Americans were ready to say “*Enough*. Enough compromise of principles; enough betrayal of people and ideals; enough cruelty; enough gradual surrender of what had been won in 1776” (19).

These opening statements are as close as Goodheart comes to making an explicit argument in the book. While he cites scholarship, he does not engage the ways that other historians have dealt with the enormous complexities in this issue. Rather, *1861* is a series of very long character sketches that detail the ways some people awakened to the necessity of war against the South and against the slavery it harbored.

Most of those characters are Northerners or Westerners, ranging from Abraham Lincoln and Major Robert Anderson to the young James Garfield in Ohio and Jessie Benton Frémont, dynamic wife of John C. Frémont, in San Francisco. His fullest portrayal is of Elmer Ellsworth, the first Union soldier killed in the war, felled in Alexandria, Virginia, after taking down a large Confederate flag visible from the White House across the Potomac.

Goodheart’s most powerful pages are devoted to the story of the three enslaved men who rowed to freedom at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, on May 23. In these pages, Goodheart tells the story of Frank Baker, Shepard Mallory, and James Townsend as a complex drama. His portrait of General Benjamin Butler is memorable and his evocation of the complicated negotiations surrounding the adaptation of the word “contraband” telling. Goodheart’s narrative skill serves us well in this episode, conveying the awakening theme in its most persuasive form.

Goodheart’s strategy of using a single year as a disciplined framing device makes sense. Focusing on what characters could know in the moment helps counter the powerful tendency of Civil War history to get ahead of itself, to find the outcomes of the war present from the beginning. Goodheart uses the tight chronological frame to good narrative effect but is not particularly interested in using it to gain disciplined analytical perspective. He chooses characters who awakened in 1861 and neglects those who seemed insensible to the redeeming promise around them. White Southerners appear largely as foils to the struggles of white Northerners and African Americans to establish freedom. He pays little attention to electoral politics and the deep fault lines that politics revealed throughout the war; we would not guess that Lincoln would barely win

renomination, much less election, three years after this story of national awakening ends. Goodheart says his book “tells a story foreshadowing things to come,” but it only foreshadows some things. (22)

The most surprising omission in *1861* is the battle of Bull Run, the first major military struggle in the Civil War. While Goodheart relates the death of Elmer Ellsworth in great detail, he gives only a few scattered paragraphs to the battle at Manassas Junction where, in the middle of 1861, thousands were killed, wounded, or lost. At that battle, a different kind of awakening occurred, an awakening to the immense challenge that lay before the American people. Including that struggle may well have deepened Goodheart’s argument, but he barely gestures toward the battle. Goodheart thinks we have had enough death in our histories, but actual warfare cannot be expunged from a history of a wartime society.

As we enter upon the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, it is good to have books such as this, books that bring new ways of seeing. The challenge, as always, is to combine fresh perspective with hard-won knowledge, to tell new stories even as we acknowledge those we cannot afford to forget.

Edward L. Ayers is president and professor of history at the University of Richmond. He is the author of In the Presence of Mine Enemies: Civil War in the Heart of America (W. W. Norton, 2003), which won the Bancroft Prize.