

War Stuff: The Struggle for Human and Environmental Resources in the American Civil War

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Review

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Cashin, Joan E. *War Stuff: The Struggle for Human and Environmental Resources in the American Civil War*. Cambridge University Press, ISBN 9781108413183

In her new monograph, *War Stuff*, Joan E. Cashin argues that white Southern civilians lost the contest with the Confederate and Federal field armies over material and human resources. At first Unionists and secessionists generally cooperated with their respective armies to provide goods—chiefly food, timber, and housing—and services, such as labor and spying. In doing so, they drew upon the prewar “communalist” ethics of sharing, resource stewardship, and nature appreciation, which Cashin finds among antebellum white Southerners and Northerners alike.

As the war progressed, both armies routinely violated regulations, such as the Lieber Code (1863), that aimed to restrict damaging civilians and their property, “with an ever growing sense of entitlement” and suffered few disciplinary consequences from courts martial or officers (131). While less discussed than the military, the governments, especially that of Jefferson Davis, colluded to underpay civilians and impress goods. Over time, Cashin argues, the gulf between Southerners and soldiers broadened as citizens watched the armies do the unthinkable—take hostages, deface graves, erase forests, invade and destroy houses, and waste precious food, while those on the home front starved. What resulted was “complete exploitation” of Southern civilians, or what Cashin terms “total war,” as well as a catastrophic dissolution of social bonds that rendered white Southerners devoid of the “priorities and creativity to solve political, economic, and social problems” (4, 171). Destruction persisted in collective memory, as white Southerners “lost the ability to tell the truth” about their own army’s role in material collapse, and there was no ethical reckoning on the part of the Confederate military (171).

Drawing on extensive archival research—mainly personal accounts—Cashin focuses on the specific material resources of humans and their services (primarily war-adjacent white Southerners), sustenance, timber, and habitat. These categories echo the choices of Megan Kate Nelson’s *Ruin Nation* (2012), but where Nelson’s book explored how destruction could reinforce or prompt reinvention of social bonds—e.g. Nelson’s soldiers took pride in their communally constructed huts and reimagined masculinity to suit their broken bodies postwar—Cashin’s soldiers appear mainly as villains. While a select few objected to their roles in human and natural devastation, sympathy is mainly reserved for the civilians, whose efforts at resistance, from serving as smugglers to driving their cattle into the woods in secret, ultimately did little to arrest the destructive tide.

It is little wonder that Cashin, an experienced scholar of material culture, excels at using objects to convey subtle realities of Civil War era experience. In her capable hands white Southern homes come to life, filled with calico curtains, hominy mortars, and family Bibles, waiting to be vandalized or ransacked by soldiers. Also important is Cashin's success in connecting home front to war front, exploring how new "foodways" emerged and reminding that army resource extraction had immediate and long-term impacts on humans and the natural and built environments (62).

While Cashin affirms her desire to evoke gender, military, material, and environmental history of the Civil War, much of this literature is touched on too briefly to substantially engage the larger debates of the fields. For example, the contested concept of "total war" is declared in one line and footnote without further exploration. Cashin also declines to engage in the long narratives of nineteenth-century environmental history, such as the rise of capitalism (e.g. William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*) or the origins of conservation and preservation, both of which seem relevant to her narrative arc of communalism to individualism.

In the end, *War Stuff* impresses the reader with the magnitude of destruction to personal property and social ties, but it also leaves one with unanswered questions. First, didn't the same process by which the armies consumed material objects also consume the bonds of nearly four million Southerners of color, setting them free? And second, if white Southerners exited the war so bereft of social ties, how did they manage to successfully resist Reconstruction over the next decade?

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