

Civil War Writing: New Perspectives on Iconic Texts

Wallace Hettle

University of Northern Iowa, wallace.hettle@uni.edu

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

Recommended Citation

Hettle, Wallace (2020) "Civil War Writing: New Perspectives on Iconic Texts," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.22.1.24

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol22/iss1/24>

Review

Wallace Hettle

Winter 2020

Gallagher, Gary W. and Stephen Cushman, eds., *Civil War Writing: New Perspectives on Iconic Texts*. Louisiana State University Press, 2019. \$48.00 ISBN 978-0-8071-7024-3

In *Civil War Writing*, editors Gary Gallagher and Stephen Cushman bring together commentary on a wide-ranging group of memoirs, autobiographies, and other personal narratives of the war. Although the book is lacking in a unified thematic emphasis, it rests on something equally important. The editors have assembled an all-star lineup of contributors who produce a book with many quality contributions. The editors modestly, perhaps too modestly, state that this book fails to adequately represent the diversity of voices produced by the war. While this volume may over-represent stories from soldiers, the editors promised that more essays, focusing on a wide variety of topics, are on the way.

Elizabeth R. Varon offers an informative look at Joseph Wilson, the African-American soldier and historian. She convincingly makes the case that his *The Black Phalanx* (1887) is an overlooked gem. Wilson belonged to two separate black regiments, the Second Louisiana Native Guard and the famous 54th Massachusetts infantry. Drawing on Wilson's pension file, she traces connections between Wilson's postwar political careers as a leading member of the Virginia Republican Party.

William C. Davis provides a critical examination of the autobiography of Loreta Jane Velasquez, widely thought to be a woman who crossed gender lines to serve as a soldier. Davis makes a signal contribution by producing an abundance of evidence to debunk Velasquez's story. However, Davis fails to appreciate the work of literary scholars who strike him as unconcerned about the accuracy of the text. He dismisses them unfairly for taking a postmodern approach. Thankfully, we are long past the theory wars of the 1980s. In the present scholarly world, I am not sure what postmodern means, and I'm not convinced that Davis does either. In fact, Velasquez's book remains of interest to many critics because its popularity can tell us much about the cultural assumptions of postwar readers.

As I write this review, yet another film adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's seemingly timeless novel *Little Women* is opening in theaters. J. Matthew Gallman rightly seeks to locate *Little Women* historically, that is, to diminish that sense of timelessness. First, he describes the book as a novel of the home front and teases out connections between the coming-of-age story and the war itself. Second, he examines the differing film version of the story. It is hard for me to believe that this new iteration of the *Little Women* has been released a full quarter century after the 1994 version with Winona Ryder. Times have changed since then, and likely we will get a significantly different version of the tale.

Brenda Stevenson is the editor of Charlotte Forten's journals. Forten, the daughter of a prosperous Philadelphia abolitionist family, led a fascinating life best remembered for her Civil War service as a teacher of contraband slaves along the Carolina coast. Stevenson takes a straightforward biographical approach to her subject, although she drops in some unfamiliar and remarkable findings.

Sarah Gardner thoughtfully examines the story of South Carolina writer Mary Chesnut. Chesnut, of course, is known for publishing her *Diary of Dixie*, a hybrid diary, novel, and memoir. Gardner believes that the unorthodox nature of the text makes it even more interesting than it otherwise might be. The historian begins by examining the publication history of the book, noting both its ambiguity and popular reception both in the 19th century, and culminating in C. Vann Woodward's scholarly but still problematic version of the book. Even more interesting, Gardner examines Chesnut's reading habits to place her within a broader Anglo-American cultural context. This approach intrigued me and led me to hope that a new biography of Chesnut is in the offing.

I have not discussed all of the contributions to this book, but I am impressed by the quality of the research presented. Civil War historians will find abundant worthwhile material here, and hopefully Gallagher and Cushman will bring us another book with more such perceptive essays.

Wallace Hettle is a Professor of History at the University of Northern Iowa. His most recent book is *The Confederate Homefront: A History in Documents* (2017).