

Civil War Book Review

Spring 2020

Article 1

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Editorial

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As the grief of spring rolls into the outrage of summer, Americans are witnessing a cataclysm over the soul of their nation. We face a multitude of crises that stem from unresolved pathologies of America's recent and distant past. The erosion of democratic norms and institutions, systematic racism, income inequality, poverty, and more – all with us before 2020 – have been laid bare and worsened by a pandemic and by toxic leadership at the highest levels of government. Amidst these calamities, we also face a crisis of history and historical memory. At its heart, it is a struggle over America's historical record, who has claim to it – and, by extension, to America – and what its legacies mean for the future of the United States. Historians must continue their vital mission of uncovering, interrogating, and illuminating the whole and complex truths of our nation's past. The historian's task, along with sharing insights with the public, is crucial to the process of establishing and maintaining a national story for a more inclusive, diverse, and democratic America. We, the Editorial Staff of the *Civil War Book Review*, are honored to play a small role in that process by providing reviews of some of most important Civil War and Reconstruction-era scholarship published between 2017 and early 2020. We hope that their insights convey how the legacies of the Civil War and Reconstruction have profoundly shaped the dilemmas of our present.

The Spring 2020 issue includes our official statement from June 4th of the ongoing nationwide protests, one feature work and interview, and sixteen book reviews that address a wide range of themes in Civil War scholarship. However, two major themes define this issue: the war in the West and Civil War memory. Traditional histories of the American Civil War have divided the conflict into three theaters: the East, the West (between Appalachia and the Mississippi River), and the Trans-Mississippi West. Until the late 20th century, histories of the Civil War placed the military and political center of the conflict on the East – the region generally east and south of the Appalachian Mountains. The focus on the war in the East revealed several major influences on mid-twentieth century historiography. First was the

prevalence of post-WWII notions of war and warfare that dominated military history. In the wake of WWII, American scholars and the public developed a general understanding of war reflective of their views of WWII: a just and epic contest defined by military operations on the battlefield with clear distinctions of uniformed combatants and clean start and end dates. For Civil War historians, eastern and western – to some degree - theaters offered a seemingly perfect case study for the “good” war, where the conflict began at Ft. Sumter, South Carolina in April 1861 and ended after four years of brutal and honorable combat at the McLean House in Appomattox, Virginia. It is an interpretation of the war that is both epic and romantic, which speaks to the second influence.

The persistence of the Lost Cause in historical memory and popular culture shaped some military histories of the war late into the 20th century. The Lost Cause explained a history of the war that centered on the trials of gentleman-commanders and their armies, particularly the forlorn triumphs of Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. More than just a white southern perspective of the war, the Lost Cause supported a national and reconciliationist version of the war as an epic struggle between brothers over constitutional rights. The East was the stage upon which this contest unfolded. A third and lamentable factor that inspired the focus on the war in the East and “West” was the persistent exclusion of Native Americans and the Far West into histories of the war. With the growth of indigenous and borderlands histories since the 1970s and a profound shift in American understandings of war over the last generation, historians have expanded their focus beyond traditional confines to include distant places and little-known figures that nonetheless shaped the course and outcomes of the American Civil War.

The section on the Civil War West begins with a full interview, partial transcription, and review of Megan Kate Nelson’s acclaimed book, *The Three-Cornered War*. Alexandra E. Stern’s review provides us with a glimpse of this rich and powerful narrative that explores the Civil War as it unfolded in New Mexico Territory from the perspective of nine people. The varied perspectives, ranging from the frontier legend Kit Carson to lesser known figures like Juanita, a Navajo weaver, highlight the war in the Far West as a complex and triangular affair involving the actions and agendas of Confederates, Americans, and Native peoples. The Civil War in New Mexico was as much an Indian war as it was a struggle over Union, freedom, and slavery. Stern’s review of *The Three-Cornered War* is followed by Armando Alonzo’s assessment of *The Civil War on the Rio Grande*. The book is a collection of essays that place the Civil War along

Texas's southern border within the larger context of "the consolidation of the United States as its army and citizens marched South and West." The essays approach the war from a variety of angles, providing rich analysis of social, political, and economic conditions that caused and shaped the conflict along the Rio Grande. The final review of this section is Samuel Watson's treatment of *Soldiers in the Southwest Borderlands*. Similar to *The Civil War on the Rio Grande*, *Soldiers in the Southwest Borderlands* is a collection of essays that places the experience of the Civil War in the Southwest within the larger context of the region's history by exploring "the diversity of western soldiers, their service and their lives...before, during, and after the Civil War." Taken together, Stern, Alonzo, and Watsons' reviews provide us with an assessment of work that is expanding Civil War history far beyond the eastern and western battlefields. The history of the Civil War in the Far West represented a continuation and acceleration of trends that had shaped the region and its people decades before the firing on Fort Sumter.

As evidenced by the contemporary debate over Confederate monuments, Civil War memory remains a subject of high visibility and profound relevance in early 21st century America. Americans have contested how the Civil War should be remembered and commemorated since the war ended in 1865. But the study of Civil War memory emerged as a prominent field in Civil War historiography in the 1980s and '90s, playing a critical role in expanding the conversation of Confederate symbology in public spaces. Recent scholarship continues to build on that foundation and illustrate the significance of war memory in American culture. Leading the section on Civil War memory is Gaines Foster's review of Thomas J. Brown's *Civil War Monuments and the Militarization of America*. Brown offers a rich and comprehensive look at how "evolutionary ideology and militarism shaped [Civil War] monuments across the country." This cultural phenomenon influenced both northern and southern states, despite key differences in how they commemorated the war. Next is W. Fitzhugh Brundage's review of Shannon Bontrager's *Death at the Edges of Empire*. Though not exclusively focusing on Civil War memory, Bontrager tracks how the "commemoration of the fallen citizen soldier" evolved from the Civil War to World War I. Of particular note is Bontrager's focus on the "ideological underpinnings" of these commemorative practices. Similar to Brown's assessment of American militarization, Bontrager links the culture of commemoration with aspirations of empire that persisted through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The next assessment in this group comes from Daniel Sunshine who reviewed Cody Marrs's *Not Even Past: The Stories We Keep Telling About the Civil War*. Marrs provides the reading public with a fascinating and accessible introduction to Civil War memory. *Not Even Past* masterfully summarizes the varied interpretations of war and how they impacted nearly every corner of American culture throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, from academic scholarship and literature to film, and art. As Sunshine notes, it is "hard to imagine a better introduction to the topic for an undergraduate or an interested member of the public." The final review in the Civil War memory section is Chris Mackowski's take on Matthew Petty's *The Battle of the Wilderness in Myth and Memory*. Unlike many works of Civil War memory which tend to study how Americans have remembered and commemorated the war as a whole, Petty's work provides a focused examination of the Battle of the Wilderness. It is both a work of memory and environmental history that "explains why the Wilderness has such power over our imaginations." Joining the ranks of Carol Reardon's *Pickett's Charge in History and Memory*, Petty offers a fascinating examination of one battle and the fight over its historical memory.

Proceeding from the dominant themes of this issue, we continue with reviews that cover a broad range of topics from political culture and intrigue to enslaved resistance and military campaigns. Civil War political history remains one of the most popular and oldest fields in the war's vast historiography. This issue features three reviews of some of the most recent work on Civil War politics. The first is Frank J. Williams's assessment of Edward Achorn's *Every Drop of Blood*. Achorn provides both a retelling of that fateful day as well as insightful analysis of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, one of the most famous in American history. The next two reviews were conducted by Allen Guelzo, the first on Zachary A. Fry's *A Republic in the Ranks* and the second on Brad Metzler and John Mensch's *The Lincoln Conspiracy*. Fry's book is a fascinating examination of political culture and politicization within the Army of the Potomac. It is a fresh addition to the civil-military debate in Civil War historiography. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of *The Lincoln Conspiracy*. Brad Metzler and John Mensch attempted to narrate and examine the mysterious Baltimore plot to assassinate Abraham Lincoln in 1861. However, as Allen Guelzo points out, the book is too plagued by a "hyper-ventilated style of crime fiction," distracting digressions, and historical inaccuracies to succeed in that task. Readers might find *The Lincoln Conspiracy* entertaining, but not insightful.

Moving forward from Civil War political history, our Spring issue features reviews of two works that focus on social and racial injustice. One book takes a broad approach, examining social injustice as a consistent theme throughout early American history; the other focuses on the actions of one warrior in fighting to make the United States a better, more expansive democracy. Donald F. Johnson reviewed Kelly A. Ryan's *Everyday Crimes: Social Violence and Civil Rights in Early America*. Ryan's book is a sweeping and thorough account of social violence directed against people who were the legal dependents of others from the 17th to the 19th centuries. This long list included enslaved men and women, married white women, and young laborers. Though Ryan's study ends in the early 19th century, well before the Civil War, its findings illustrate the wide range of implications that social violence had on American politics and culture, which shaped the nation's course towards conflagration. Next, Hilary Green reviewed Erica Armstrong Dunbar's *She Came to Slay: The Life and Times of Harriet Tubman*. Among the many accomplishments of Dunbar's work, Green notes, perhaps the most important is that she "offers an accessible and multidimensional biography of Harriet Tubman Ross." Rather than a treatment that only focuses on Harriet Tubman's actions on the Underground Railroad and during the Civil War, Dunbar investigates her personal struggles as well as her post-war career in activism. It is an excellent account of one of America's greatest figures.

The Spring issue closes with reviews of military histories. Despite the broadening and deepening of Civil War scholarship over the last half-century, the study of battles and campaigns maintains a prominent place. The first work of this section is a new edition of James Longstreet's memoir, *From Manassas to Appomattox*. George Rable offers a thorough review of this "indispensable primary source" for all scholars who are interested in the Army of Northern Virginia's high command and Longstreet's personal experience during the war. Next are two reviews by Fred L. Johnson III, the first on A. Wilson Green's *A Campaign of Giants* and the second on Donald L. Miller's *Vicksburg: Grant's Campaign that Broke the Confederacy*. Both works offer sweeping and fresh examinations of two of the war's most important military campaigns, accounting for the experience of iconic commanders and the rank and file. Taken together, the preceding reviews offer a great assessment of contemporary scholarship on the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. As we look to the past for clarity in this moment of crisis, the Editorial Staff of the *Civil War Book Review* hopes that the Spring 2020 issue encourages you to further explore scholarship on this critical era in American history.

