

An Environmental History of the Civil War

Matthew Stith
mstith@uttyler.edu

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

Recommended Citation

Stith, Matthew (2021) "An Environmental History of the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 .
DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.1.07
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss1/7>

Review

Stith, Matthew M.

Winter 2021

Browning, Judkin and Timothy Silver. *An Environmental History of the Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, 2020. HARCOVER. \$30.00. ISBN 9781469655383 pp. 261

One imagines an environmental history of the Civil War would entail vast amounts of material across four or more years and most of a continent. To attempt a book in line with such inclusivity would risk rendering the project either unbearable or impossible for the writer *and* the reader. Civil War historian Judkin Browning and environmental historian Timothy Silver found a way around this problem. *An Environmental History of the Civil War* is a holistic synthesis of nature and the Civil War confined to fewer than 200 narrative pages, and it works. Browning and Silver budget words carefully by dividing the war chronologically into separate environmental themes, giving a year or so and a chapter each to sickness, weather, food, animals, death, and terrain. To have covered all six topics consistently for the entire war might have expanded the book into nearly a thousand pages, which conjures the aforementioned anxiety. Their approach works better. The co-authors skillfully blend history with science—as any good environmental history ought to do—and give a level of agency to the natural environment as it pertained to humans and their actions. Ultimately, they show that the Civil War was “an ecological event that not only affected people but also altered natural systems and reshaped the already complex interaction between humans, other organisms, and the physical environment.” (4)

Until recently, this crucial perspective has been mostly lost in Civil War memory and history. Environmental historians have touched on the war, and Civil War historians have dabbled in environmental history, but few have bridged the gap as fully as Browning and Silver do here. Indeed, the authors join a small but growing number of Civil War environmental historians in an effort to rediscover and recast the war in the same natural prism through which the war’s original actors viewed and experienced it 160 years ago. The past decade has seen important books by Lisa M. Brady, Megan Kate Nelson, Kathryn Shively, Brian Allen Drake,

Erin Stewart Mauldin, Adam H. Petty, and, most recently, Kenneth W. Noe, all demonstrating that Civil War historians can no longer ignore or marginalize the environment's role in the conflict. Even more scholars have produced dissertations, chapters, and articles that explore the war's environmental underpinning. Mike Burns, Ryan Bixby, G. David Schieffler, and others have helped give agency to the natural medium in which humans fought and endured the war. *An Environmental History of the Civil War* is a timely and significant synthesis of and for this welcome turn in Civil War history and historiography.

Browning and Silver devote the first two chapters—and the war's first two years—to sickness and weather. The former was probably the most feared environmental factor during the Civil War, and it was certainly the deadliest. For historians, it remains one of the best known. Building on the work of Andrew McIlwaine Bell, Shauna Devine, Margaret Humphreys, Jim Downs, Kathryn Shively, and others, Browning and Silver deftly show that the sudden onset of war in 1861 opened the bacterial and viral floodgates. Roving and sedentary armies the size of towns and cities, write the authors, “provided a new and nearly ideal environment for an invisible organism that quickly took up residence in the noses and throats of many recruits.” (9) Deadly viruses spread by humans and mosquitoes such as measles, smallpox, yellow fever, and malaria plagued hundreds of thousands of combatants as did often-fatal and always-unpleasant bacterial infections like typhoid, dysentery, diarrhea, and venereal disease. The weather, on the other hand, both hurt and helped Union and Confederate armies in 1862—the year on which the weather chapter is focused—and throughout the war. Unpredictable weather, Browning and Silver make clear, broke even the best laid military plans and led to both disaster and success from California to Virginia. Browning and Silver's weather chapter serves as a useful and thoughtful overview for Kenneth W. Noe's recent, superb, and enormous *The Howling Storm: Weather, Climate, and the American Civil War* (2020). At the most basic level, Browning and Silver make clear, the war was fought outside—a place where weather patterns dictated human patterns and, in many ways, the course of the war itself.

Food and animals shaped human and war patterns, too. Millions of combatants and noncombatants had to eat, and, by 1863, food had become of paramount importance to those fighting in and affected by the war zone. Adding to and synthesizing work by Ted Steinberg, Andrew F. Smith, and Erin Stewart Mauldin, Browning and Silver explore the war's gastronomic foundations and show that a big part of the Confederacy's declining persistence rested on caloric

scarcity. In 1863, for example, the Union had stockpiled mass amounts of food while “southern armies continued to starve.” (91) Accessing and preserving food—and agriculture more generally—shaped a big part of the Confederate war strategy and demise. The Antietam, Gettysburg, and Vicksburg Campaigns were all directly fashioned by food. Indeed, if the want for food were stripped from the equation, the causes, course, and consequences of each campaign and the war as a whole would have turned out quite differently. Animals, too, played no small role in the Union and Confederate war efforts. Browning and Silver show how animals unwittingly served both armies as beasts of burden and of sustenance. Horses, mules, cattle, and pigs became central characters at every point and every level of the Civil War. But as much as soldiers and civilians relied on animals, historians have largely missed them. Armies moved because of horses and mules and soldiers marched because of cattle and pigs. Browning and Silver ultimately remind us that animal history is in so many ways human history, and this is rarely so apparent than in a time of war.

Death and disability together with terrain mark the final chapters of the book and, in some ways, the war. Drawing on Drew Gilpin Faust’s *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2008), Browning and Silver examine the various environmental meanings and realities of death—an action that repeated nearly 750,000 times in four years. They appropriately contend that the Civil War “forced both combatants and civilians to confront death as an ecological event.” (136) Inherently environmental and biological undertones marked death from the very moments after it occurred to months, or even years, of bodily decay. They also explore the nature of disability. Disabled veterans became constant reminders to themselves and those around them of the catastrophic results of war. It is also true that so many decomposing corpses and empty sleeves could at least partially be blamed on terrain, which comprises the book’s final topic and chapter. When properly leveraged by military commanders, terrain led to devastating results for the opposing side. Indeed, most Civil War battles can hardly be adequately explained without some attention to the land on which they were fought. Recognizing this, Browning and Silver examine the nature of terrain in Virginia and elsewhere as the war ground to a bloody end in 1864 and 1865. They also pay heed to the vital importance of the stuff within the land, namely salt. The terrain on which battles had been fought remained important long after the smoke cleared, and, as Browning and Silver show, it is still a vital if often misinterpreted window through which we try to understand battlefields today.

Browning and Silvers' fine synthesis serves well as a reminder that the Civil War did not exist in a political and military vacuum. It existed in—and because of—the natural environment. Their work ought to serve as a jumping-off point for a new generation of scholars who seek to explore the natural world in which the Civil War happened. Indeed, as Browning and Silver make abundantly clear, there remains plenty of new historical ground to go around. *An Environmental History of the Civil War* is a concise and beautifully articulated study that should help Civil War historians at all levels rethink the war's traditional narrative. Moreover, the book's accessibility and importance make it well-suited not only for undergraduate and graduate courses but interested readers everywhere.

Matthew M. Stith is Associate Professor of History at the University of Texas at Tyler and the author of *Extreme Civil War: Guerrilla Warfare, Environment, and Race on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier* (2016) and co-editor of *Beyond the Quagmire: New Interpretations of the Vietnam War* (2019).