

# Civil War Book Review

---

Fall 2021

Article 1

---

## Editorial

Jeffery Hardin Hobson  
jhobso8@lsu.edu

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Hobson, Jeffery Hardin (2021) "Editorial," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 4 .  
DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.4.01  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss4/1>

## Editorial

Hobson, Jeffery Hardin

Fall 2021

This issue of the *Civil War Book Review* is cohered around the often-intersecting phenomena of domesticity and religion in the Civil War era. Although historians have abandoned the notion that the nineteenth-century domestic sphere was hermetically cordoned from the public, the books reviewed herein demonstrate that studying the home as a distinct space remains an enlightening endeavor, even as the featured authors expand our understanding of what constituted the domestic sphere. The books reviewed in this issue also reinforce our understanding of religion's significance to nineteenth-century Americans' lives and identities. The authors further elucidate the ways in which Christianity helped shape Civil-War era Americans' attitudes toward the institution of slavery, the war over its expansion, the society the war rent apart, and the society Americans built after Appomattox.

Americans are wont to believe children's incorporation into the consumer culture is a recent development. Daniel Thomas Cook overturns that notion in *The Moral Project of Childhood: Motherhood, Material Life, and Early Children's Consumer Culture*, in which Cook demonstrates that modern childhood was "born of" consumerism. Reviewer Paul Ringel writes that "Cook's arguments are often groundbreaking," especially his contention that white middle- and upper-class mothers, their children, and the market existed in a "triangular relationship" rather than an antagonistic one. White mothers did not worry that their children were nascent consumers, rather they endeavored to foster a sense of "taste" in their children's consumption habits. Ringel concludes that readers, especially those interested in nineteenth- and early-twentieth century childhood and the family, "will find ideas of significant value" in Cook's work.

Crystal Lynn Webster's *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood: African American Children in the Antebellum North* will similarly appeal to readers interested in nineteenth century childhood. Although there exists a growing corpus on enslaved children's experiences, Webster's book is among the earliest to investigate free Black children's experiences. Reviewer Anna Mae Duane explains that by examining "children at school, play, and in institutional settings," Webster reveals

how northerners' practice of gradual emancipation separated families and situated Black children "outside the boundaries of Victorian childhood." Their exclusion from Victorian childhood was often caused or exacerbated by "well-meaning white" reformers who believed Black children's poverty reflected their parents' individual failings rather than resulting from systemic racism and concomitant inequality. White reformers therefore believed the institutions they ran were better suited to raise Black children than their birth parents, a conclusion Black parents and their community challenged. Reviewer Anna Mae Duane writes that *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood* "will inspire many scholars in African American and Childhood Studies to continue down the path that Webster illuminates so creatively."

In her analysis of Black fatherhood and masculinity in and after slavery, *Slavery, Fatherhood, and Paternal Duty in African American Communities over the Long Nineteenth Century*, Libra Hilde finds that Black fathers' duties extended beyond ensuring their children's material comfort. Fatherly responsibilities that Hilde terms "ideological provisioning" included ensuring their children's psychological and emotional wellbeing. Among the most important aspects of ideological provisioning was the simultaneous and seemingly contradictory task of instilling in their children a sense of self-worth while teaching them how to survive the dehumanizing institution of slavery and the white racial violence that followed it. Christianity offered fathers aid and comfort as Black preachers often acted as "surrogate fathers" to Black children while also teaching Black fathers how to help their children endure slavery and white supremacy. Reviewer Kathleen Kennedy writes that Hilde's research "deepens and adds specificity to more general arguments about fatherhood and caretaking among enslaved men" in an "accessible" style that centers her subjects' personal stories, which results in a book that will find appeal in a broad audience.

Reviewer Julie Winch writes that Laura Arnold Leibman's *Once We Were Slaves: The Extraordinary Journey of a Multi-Racial Jewish Family* shows that "racial identity, cultural affinity, faith and family ties counted for so much (and so little) in different settings and to different people." Arnold accomplishes this by chronicling the trajectory of a Jewish family that began in the mid-seventeenth century with the children of a white man, George Hill, and Jemima Lopez, a woman enslaved by a Jewish widow, Hannah Esther Lopez. Gill's will gave Jemima and their children the wealth to buy their freedom, which also afforded some in the family the ability to move to more accepting environments where they could craft identities, first, as Jewish *nação*, or

Portuguese Jews rather than “colored” Jews, before eventually adopting white identities. Their identity making was so successful that it obscured the family’s multiracial origins, so that by the twentieth century, descendants believed they came from a slave trader, Aaron Lopez of New York, and not a white man and an enslaved woman. Though the story may sound complicated, Winch believes Arnold Leibman’s book “resembles a huge mosaic,” of which “each piece is beautifully crafted.”

Reviewer J. Matthew Gallman believes *Household War: How Americans Lived and Fought the Civil War*, edited by Lisa Tendrich Frank and LeeAnn White, will help historians “escape, finally, the homefront/battlefront binary” that has dominated Civil War studies. The “superb collection of essays” unfolds in four parts with each part focusing on a distinct topic: Important, political figures’ domestic lives; letters between soldiers and their families, women appealing to the state, and epistolary musings on soldiers’ dreams; the household as an important site of war; and the often broken and blended postwar households of war widows, Freedpeople, and war-worn veterans. Even though the book investigates diverse phenomena, Gallman is impressed by the book’s coherent argument that “households really did contribute to how the war was fought, and that conflict often occurred in and around those households” which the war indelibly altered.

The war altered the life of young New Orleanian, Minnie C. Hunt, as Leah Powell Duncan writes in this issue’s “Civil War Treasures.” The “Minnie C. Hunt Diary” available through the Louisiana Digital Library and at LSU’s Hill Memorial Library, chronicles Hunt’s displacement from her Louisiana home and subsequent move to Boston after the war. The diary gives insight into the experiences of upper-class, teenage white women in the war’s aftermath as well as how the war displaced people and reshuffled families. Homesickness plagued young Minnie, and timelessly typical teenage angst combined with regional and political antagonisms to make her stay in “Yankeedom” uncomfortable for both her and her hosts. Powell Duncan writes that Hunt’s diary “entries provide a candid revelation of the challenges and privileges of her particular position within a changing and complex nation,” which make the collection a useful source for scholars interested in Civil War era white women, displacement from the Civil War, and the new domesticity that resulted from it.

For this issue’s “Civil War Obscura,” Meg Groeling reviews a classic novel that perfectly ties together this issue’s two themes of domesticity and religion in the Civil War era: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Groeling had long avoided reading Harriet Beecher Stowe’s work. “The Civil War is over,

and slavery is illegal, so what good would it do to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* today?" she asked herself. Besides learning how *not* to write, the book is worth reading to better understand nineteenth-century Americans' changing religious sensibilities as well as the relationship between their dynamic religious views and slavery and race. Beyond the stock characters and maudlin moments, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* gives insight into the religious changes the Second Great Awakening inspired as well as the reform movements it spun out or intensified, including abolitionism. Groeling believes reading the book is as essential to understanding the Civil War as plotting battle plans. Stowe's work reflects Civil War era Americans' "complex moral lives and the decisions they made concerning human bondage." For these reasons, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remains a worthy read."

James P. Byrd's *A Holy Baptism of Fire & Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War* reflects the fact that Americans certainly interpreted the war and its causes as moral issues and interpreted them using the Bible. Reviewer Bruce T. Gourley writes that while investigations of religion in the Civil War era abound, the Bible is typically "lurking in the background, or, at best, serving in a supporting role." Byrd's book changes that by centering the Bible, which was the most familiar book to Civil-War era Americans, North and South. However, in the lead up to and during the war, Americans in the two regions interpreted this familiar book in ways that would make it unfamiliar to their regional antagonists while Americans in both regions insisted it gave holy sanction to their cause. "Both sides volleyed biblical texts back and forth," Byrd observes, though both sides had favorite verses. Americans tried to come to terms with the immensity of the war's death toll through scriptural references. Emancipation from slavery was a modern-day Exodus, and Lincoln a modern-day Moses. Gourley writes that "all told . . . *A Holy Baptism of Fire & Blood* is a unique and powerful first-hand recounting of the Civil War's ebb and flow through the elastic prism of the book most familiar to nineteenth-century Americans."

Elizabeth L. Jemison examines how Black and white southerners read the Bible following the Civil War and Reconstruction in *Christian Citizens: Reading the Bible in Black and White in the Postemancipation South*. Jemison finds that Christianity and politics were inextricably intertwined among both populations, though both groups applied differing interpretations of Christianity and the Bible to southern postwar society, especially concepts of rights and citizenship. White southern Christians believed emancipation was "the new Fall" from the Edenic state of slavery while Black southern Christians believed the federal government was a godly agent

that brought liberation and freedom. Surely this meant that God also ordained a rights-based concept of citizenship, Black Christians reasoned. White southerners attempted to regain the “Christian surveillance” they exacted during slavery through white racial violence, which they hoped would ultimately stifle Black southerners’ religious expression and put them closer to the antebellum slave society’s rigid racial religious order. Reviewer Shakeel Harris writes that Jemison’s work contributes much to our understanding of postwar Americans’ religion “by clearly articulating the impact faith had on the spiritual and civic lives of black and white southerners.”

The books reviewed in this issue force us to reconsider what constituted the Civil War era domestic sphere and how the domestic and public spheres intersected. The Civil War domestic sphere was commercial, it included Black and multiracial families despite slavery’s and even emancipation’s tendency to disrupt them, it included men as emotional caretakers, and it included supply lines to the battlefield. These books show us how families crafted collective identities in much the same way individuals did in the nineteenth century. The books further remind us that the nuclear family Americans have become so accustomed to is a relatively recent innovation. The extended fictive families Black people created to survive in slavery and emancipation, and the war widows who lived together to survive the vagaries of postwar life reflect the fact that what constitutes the domestic, and what constitutes family has long been fluid and dynamic. Further, these books remind us that the domestic sphere was a religious sphere. Religion was an elemental aspect of nineteenth-century Americans’ lives and identity. It was through their religious experiences, beliefs and Biblical interpretations that they made sense of the Civil War and its aftermath. They used the Bible to argue for their righteousness on the battlefield and in postwar politics. Both the domestic sphere and religion were important and overlapping, and often contested and contentious, sites of Civil War era Americans’ identity, society, and culture.

Thank you,  
Jeffery Hardin Hobson