

Worth the Read: New Books in Civil War Era History

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Editorial

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Though no theme binds together this issue's reviews, multiple reviewed books are in conversations with one another. Two reviews assess books that investigate vastly different aspects of medicine in the Civil War era—medicine and enslaved peoples, and Civil War veterans' mental health. Three books reviewed in this issue either center or at least touch on memory and the Civil War. However, the majority of the books reviewed in this issue reflect the diversity of Civil War era historical study, as they examine a range of topics from anti-immigration riots to enslaved women's religious work, from Lincoln and the Gettysburg address to the dynamics of violence in the Civil War. This issue's two feature essays similarly reflect the manifold historical phenomena worth studying in the Civil War era—political humor and Confederate monetary policy's effects on New Orleanians.

Savannah L. Williamson reviewed *Medicine and Healing in the Age of Slavery*, a collection of essays about the relationship between slavery and medicine, edited by Sean Morey Smith and Christopher D. E. Willoughby. Williamson provides a personal anecdote that illustrates the transmission of medical knowledge through and beyond slavery. Williamson then walks readers through the book's sections which cover diverse topics including the transference of medicinal knowledge within enslaved communities, enslaved peoples' efforts to control their own health, the state's role in "regulating race, labor, commerce, health, and medicine in the Atlantic world of slavery," and slavery's legacy in healthcare today. Williamson does not demure from praising the book, writing that *Medicine and Healing in the Age of Slavery*, "is a groundbreaking interdisciplinary collection of essays."

In her review of Dillon J. Carroll's *Invisible Wounds: Mental Illness and Civil War Soldiers*, Debra Sheffer explains that Carroll "combines medical history, social history, military history, and institutional history" to examine how the Civil War affected soldiers' mental health and how soldiers coped with their trauma. Carroll "provides very good information and analyses of the conditions, challenges, and experiences of soldiers, nurses, doctors, and civilians," Sheffer

concludes. Sheffer finishes by explaining that with this book Carroll has entered an ongoing historiographical debate about the usage of contemporary language to describe historical mental health issues.

Three books reviewed in this issue examine Americans' historical memory of the Civil War. In his review of Meg Groeling's *First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, the North's First Civil War Hero*, Gerald Prokopowicz writes that Groeling "takes a minor but well-known story, amplifies it with new evidence, and enhances its meaning by connecting it to larger social and political trends"—history done right. In the end, Prokopowicz praises the book as an example of historical scholarship written from outside the ivory tower that both educates and entertains.

When reviewer Wesley Moody first cracked open Stephen Cushman's *The Generals' Civil War, What Their Memoirs Can Teach Us Today*, he was concerned that a non-historian had decided to "invade" his field of research. However, Cushman's expert investigation of Civil War generals' memoirs as literary historical artifacts relieved Moody of his "great reserve." Cushman's ability to explain the memoirs' varying popularities in the past and present, his elucidation of their literary allusions, and his examination of the memoirs' relationship to the turn-of-the-century publishing business makes this book "a considerable contribution to the field of Civil War history," in Moody's estimation.

Though Caroline E. Janney's *Ends of War: The Unfinished Fight of Lee's Army after Appomattox* is not about historical memory, *per se*, she does show how tropes later found in the Lost Cause movement developed immediately after Appomattox. Reviewer Andrew F. Lang writes that Janney's book reveals that "Ending wars are just as difficult, contingent, and uncertain as waging wars." Janney accomplishes this by examining freedpeoples' varied reactions to emancipation, how Confederates coped with defeat, and the legal, moral, and political forces that inspired Grant's amnesty policy as well as what that amnesty policy meant for reconciliation. Lang concludes that "Janney has performed a superb task in helping us understand our greatest war and the workings of the human condition."

Other books reviewed garnered similar praise from their reviewers. Emily Suzanne Clark writes that Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh's *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South* "is one of the most important books in African American

religious history of the past decade.” Clark concludes that “By placing women at the center,” Oghoghomeh “shifts the field’s focus away from the pulpit as a means of empowerment.”

Religion arises in Zachary Schrag’s *The Fires of Philadelphia: Citizen Soldiers, Nativists, and the 1844 Riots Over the Soul of a Nation*, reviewed by Luke Ritter. The book combines biographies of rioters and their victims, and the socio-cultural context in which the riots developed. Though Schrag offers analysis of the riots, he favors “detail and description,” which makes the book “walloping fun” to read, Ritter concludes.

Reviewer Amy S. Greenberg writes that Kevin Waite’s *West of Slavery: The Southern Dream of a Transcontinental Empire* is a “marvelous study” that “makes a convincing case for the transcontinental aspirations and reach of southern slaveholders” in the Civil War era. Waite examines southern leaders’ desires for expansion—territorial and economic—their efforts toward their goals, the beliefs that motivated them, and how adherence to those beliefs influenced southerners’ reactions to Reconstruction. The book will appeal to a wide audience, and “will make an excellent addition to undergraduate syllabi” relating to antebellum expansion, Greenberg believes.

Sarah Elliott writes that Fay A. Yarbough’s *Choctaw Confederates: The American Civil War in Indian Country*, excels in demonstrating that Choctaws’ decision to align with the Confederacy was based on self-interests. Indeed, Yarbough shows that “increasingly close interaction with white Americans shifted Choctaw culture” in the antebellum era, so that by the eve of the Civil War, they were, in many ways, “more ‘southern’” than many white southerners. Elliott finishes by praising Yarbough’s book as an “immensely valuable and illuminating” work.

Joseph Beilein Jr. reviewed Lorien Foote’s *Rites of Retaliation: Civilization, Soldiers, and Campaigns in the American Civil War*, and came away from reading it convinced it is a “well-executed contribution to Civil War history.” Foote shows that both U.S. and Confederate leaders tried to wage a war based on commonly held concepts of civilization and honor. Still, both sides sometimes diverted from their civilized, honor-bound scheme, and behaved in decidedly uncivilized and dishonorable ways. Beilein writes that “This is a great book” that will appeal to a diverse audience.

Reviewer Thomas F. Army writes that in *The Siege of Vicksburg: Climax of the Campaign to Open the Mississippi River, May 23 – July 4, 1863*, author Timothy B. Smith followed John Keegan’s dictate that military historians should produce analysis that goes beyond

“colored maps.” Though Smith dedicates considerable attention to the tactical and strategic elements of the siege, he balances his technical analysis with an examination of the human suffering the siege wrought. Army found many strengths in Smith’s work, including his emphasis that contingency mattered—Vicksburg’s fall was not inevitable. Smith’s *The Siege of Vicksburg* “is an important book,” Army concludes.

Just months after Grant secured Vicksburg for the U.S., President Lincoln delivered his inimitable Gettysburg Address, which Bradley M. and Linda I. Gottfried examine in *Lincoln Comes to Gettysburg: The Creation of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address*. Reviewer Kent Gramm writes that the husband-and-wife duo “have produced an outstanding book.” Part of the book’s success lies in its comprehensive nature, with examinations of the impulse to create a cemetery, its “location and design,” the transportation of the fallen soldiers’ bodies, and an analysis of Lincoln’s address. Along the way, the authors dispense with long-held myths, especially the stubbornly resilient belief that Lincoln wrote the address on his journey to Gettysburg.

Randolph Paul Runyon recounts an incident of racial justice in Reconstruction-era Kentucky in *The Assault on Elisha Green: Race and Religion in a Kentucky Community*. Reviewer Michael W. Fitzgerald writes that Runyon “engagingly” describes a “vivid episode” in which Black Baptist Minister Elisha Green successfully sought redress from the courts after two white Southern Methodist ministers forcibly removed the recently disabled Green from his seat in a first-class train car. Green viewed his paltry reward of fifteen dollars as a “highlight of his life.” Fitzgerald concludes that Runyon “knows how to tell a story.”

Our two feature essays examine three illuminating primary sources. Hans Rasmussen writes about two primary sources housed in LSU’s special collections that show how New Orleanians and U.S. soldiers reacted to the devaluation of Confederate money in occupied-New Orleans. H. A. Snyder, a New Orleans grocer, chronicled the city’s occupation in his diary (MSS 2198). His entries reveal how his fellow New Orleanians tried to adjust to a world in which their money was rendered useless after Major General Benjamin Butler outlawed the use of Confederate money and bonds in May of 1862. Luther M. Fairbank, a private in Company D of the 31st Massachusetts Infantry wrote in his diary (MSS 4909) that New Orleanians “all hate to take” their own money. Confederate money had quickly become little more than a novelty to U.S. soldiers and Confederates alike.

Lastly, Meg Groeling analyzes nineteenth-century American humor by examining the musings of Artemus Ward—alternate persona to Charles Farrar Browne—and his fans’ reactions to his work, including that of Abraham Lincoln. Browne’s Ward was an “illiterate rube with ‘Yankee’ common sense,” Groeling explains. In short order, his schtick evolved from newspaper essays to an internationally touring live-action show, complete with purposefully failing props and special effects. Groeling insists it is important for us to understand nineteenth-century-Americans’ humor because humor can tell us a lot about the folks of the Civil War era, “And those folks loved Artemus Ward.”

As always, thank you for your continued support and interest,
Jeffery Hardin Hobson, Editor