

The Long Civil War: New Explorations of America's Enduring Conflict

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Review

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Smith, John David and Raymond Arsenault, eds. *The Long Civil War: New Explorations of America's Enduring Conflict*. University Press of Kentucky, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$40.00 ISBN 9780813181301 pp. 234

Inspired by Eric W. Hobsbawm's concept of "the long nineteenth century," John David Smith and Raymond Arsenault have brought together ten essays that "expand the geographic, temporal, and thematic focus of what previous generations of historians judged to be mid-nineteenth-century history" in *The Long Civil War: New Explorations of America's Enduring Conflict* (11). The content of these diverse essays run chronologically from the 1830s into the twenty-first century and use a variety of methodological approaches. All of the contributors are established scholars, although not all specialize in the Civil War era.

In the opening essay, Daniel Kilbride analyzes the clashing views of two southern-born missionaries to Africa concerning the colonization movement and its attendant imperialism. A native of Georgia, J. Leighton Wilson believed that the colonization of former slaves from the United States would interfere with the work of civilizing and Christianizing native Africans. His views had been shaped by his opposition to Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Policy of the 1830s. Thomas Jefferson Bowen, also a Georgian but a few years younger than Wilson, had supported the removal policy. As a missionary in Africa, Bowen advocated mass colonization as a vehicle for civilizing and Christianizing native Africans while spreading American influence into Africa. While colonization as a tool of American imperialism failed to bear fruit before the war, afterwards, American missionaries would embrace imperialism as part of their world view.

Stanley Harrold's essay shifts attention to the late 1830s and early 1840s abolitionist lobby and the U.S. Congress. Harrold ties the origins of the lobby to efforts to work with antislavery Whigs, and not members of the new and short-lived Liberty Party, as other historians have argued. Even then, the abolitionists' relationship with antislavery Whigs occasionally strained because of the Whigs' willingness to work with their southern colleagues on partisan

issues. Harrold also confirms William Lee Miller's findings that the death of the gag rule resulted less from the abolitionist lobby's activities and more from northern Democrats abandoning support for it for a variety of reasons.

In "Officers of the U.S. Army Veterans Reserve Corps," Paul Cimbala adds to our knowledge of the varied experiences of Civil War soldiers by investigating the difficulties faced by disabled officers who found positions in the unit originally called the Invalid Corps. Full of patriotism and loyalty but limited in the military service they could carry out, and the civilian occupations they could perform, due to wounds received or other medical conditions that befell them as soldiers, these officers faced further challenges after the war when the army retrenched and no longer needed their services.

Diane Miller Sommerville shifts the focus to rhetoric in "'Bent on Suicide': The Political Rhetoric of Suicide in the Civil War-Era South." Sommerville deftly traces how the meaning of suicide as a political analogy changed during the war, at least for Southerners. During the secession crisis and after, both northerners and southerners employed the image of suicide to describe the other's action. After the war, northern Radical Republicans used the concept of state suicide theory to shape their Reconstruction policy. White southerners, on the other hand, "embraced suicide as a noble and patriotic sacrifice, constitutive of a reconceived identity grounded in white supremacy and myth" (94). Self-destruction became honorable, with fire-eater Edmund Ruffin serving as a heroic symbol.

Two essays take a biographical approach to their topics. James R. Hedtke displays how Union officer Emory Upton introduced innovative tactics during the war while fighting in the Eastern Theater, and afterwards, through his writings and suggested reforms to military policy, helped to evolve the modern American army, despite his premature death due to suicide. John David Smith focuses on twentieth-century historian Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, whose works shaped historians' understanding of southern slavery for decades. Smith reveals how Phillips' volunteer work at the army's Camp Gordon, Georgia, in 1917, at the same time he was putting the finishing touches on his influential book *American Negro Slavery*, and his observations of African American recruits under the supervision of white officers "confirmed his understanding of slavery, plantation paternalism, and the management of subjected peoples, all the while underscoring the obsession with racial control, management, order—in short, the maintenance of the status quo in the New South" (121). Thus, as a reformer, Phillips contended that African

Americans in the mid-nineteenth century and in his day and age worked best under white management.

In “The Man and the Martyr: Abraham Lincoln in African American History and Memory,” James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton trace the opinions of prominent African Americans concerning Lincoln from the war years onward. Highlighting the views of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr. and others, the authors reveal the fluctuating attitudes about the Great Emancipator and his place in history. Staying with the theme of memory, Stephen J. Whitfield observes in his contribution, “‘If at First You Don’t Secede’,” that “no feature of the national experience has endured in memory with the intense power to divide the public like the Civil War.” Whitfield attributes this to “the sheer tenacity of southern white consciousness,” and exposes how political rhetoric, social activism, historical scholarship and popular culture evoked the memory of the war to defend and justify the Jim Crow South and anti-civil rights activity (164).

Eisenhower specialist Michael J. Birkner connects the thirty-fourth president’s historical mindedness to public policy in “Dwight Eisenhower and Civil War Legacies.” According to Birkner, while “Lincoln’s task as president was to thwart the Slave Power and save the Union, which he did . . . Eisenhower felt *his* job as president was to keep the Union safe and prosperous in thwarting international communism” (187). Thus, Eisenhower did not see advancing civil rights as conducive to that responsibility. Circumstances would force the president’s hand when white supremacists attempted to stop the integration of Little Rock Central High School. Particularly fascinating is Birkner’s description of the kerfuffle Eisenhower caused when reporters overheard him making a disparaging remark about one of his idols, Robert E. Lee.

Finally, Raymond Arsenault turns to popular culture in his investigation of the history-related films that Walt Disney produced in the mid-twentieth century. In particular, two Disney films had bearing on the Civil War. In *Song of the South* (1946), Disney brought to the big screen Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus stories and his depiction of the happy antebellum South, a romanticized portrayal that differed little from that seen in 1939’s *Gone With the Wind*. A decade after *Song of the South* appeared, Disney put out *The Great Locomotive Chase* (1955), based on a true incident described by Disney as “a Civil War story that did justice to both sides” (203). In his depiction of the conflict, Disney had no place for discussion of divisive issues like the causes of the war or slavery and emancipation. “Who cared what the two sides were fighting for,”

Arsenault posits, “when bravery, honor, and character were so much in evidence.” As film historian Hal Erickson noted in his study of military comedy films, the film industry through more than half of the twentieth century found it most prudent not to dwell on the causes of the Civil War. “So far as these comedies were concerned, once upon a time there was a four-year period of unpleasantness in which Americans wearing blue uniforms fought Americans wearing gray uniforms, and that’s all we care to say on the subject.”¹

While the topics of the essays in the volume are wide ranging, notably missing from the volume is any study pertaining to women. That one could criticize Smith and Arsenault’s collection for its omission of certain themes or topics only validates the expansive spectrum of scholarship being produced that employs a broader chronological understanding of the war. *The Long Civil War* provides a taste of that approach.

Thomas F. Curran is the author of Women Making War: Female Confederate Prisoners and Union Military Justice (2020) and Soldiers of Peace: Civil War Pacifism and the Postwar Radical Peace Movement (2003). His forthcoming book, A New Mirth of Freedom: A Tongue-in-Cheek Look at the Serious Business of Civil War Humor, will be published by McFarland and Company. He teaches American history at Cor Jesu Academy, St. Louis, Missouri. He can be reached at tcurran@corjesu.org.

¹ Hal Erickson, *Military Comedy Films: A Critical Survey and Filmography of Hollywood Releases since 1918* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2012), 314.