

## Feature Essay

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## Feature Essay

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**Madden, David** *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: The Saga of Technology.*

Have you ever crawled inside a defunct forge and imagined working in that hell-hot, narrow space, glancing up at the sun struggling to penetrate the smoke hole, like the mouth of a cannon? I'll never forget standing briefly inside the Great Western Furnace on the Land Between the Rivers in Tennessee.

The Civil War was ironclad in more ways than one. North and South, veins of iron held the Union and the Confederacy together---and ripped them apart. Within the South itself, iron from the North clashed with iron forged within the Confederacy. The romance of battle has lured historians into retelling the stories of the leaders, without ever noticing that victories and defeats in each battle derived from the pervasive uses of iron---in railroads, ships, rifles---and other forged or smelted metals.

The story of technology in the Civil War has yet to be told in all its awesomeness. General impressions of its severe limitations to the contrary, the South was not separate from but a part of that story, and Tredegar Iron Works in the capital of the Confederacy stands as a symbol of what the South's industrial might actually was and what it so desperately needed to be.

We have Charles B. Dew, professor of history at Williams College, to thank for presenting the story of Tredegar Iron Works. The reprinting of Dew's *Ironmaker to the Confederacy*, 43 years after its original publication, is both a blessing and a reminder that historians have woefully neglected this essential, awesome aspect of the War---as indeed they have neglected many other aspects in favor of an endless parade of generals and battles.

Tredegar is the lightning rod for those few who feel the electric charge, radiating out over the landscapes of military campaigns, into the armies and their battles. Like constellations orbiting Tredegar are the lesser-known iron works and the many forges located throughout the hills and mountains of the South. For

instance, *The Civil War in Appalachia* includes an essay on other southern industrial works, in Appalachia of all places, suggesting the scope and unexamined aspects of the fuller story.

As an isolated case, the story of entrepreneur Joseph R. Anderson and his Tredegar Iron Works is magnificent. To adapt Dew's phrases in the table of contents, it is a story of politics, prices, and profits; of the trials of production with limited resources; of slaves, labor details, conscripts, and aliens (We must have hands!); of running the Yankee blockade; of arming the South with cannons for Lee and other generals; of declining output; of pardon and restoration in the Reconstruction era (Back to business).

Tables and figures are obligatory for such a study, and Dew obliges us. Brady's photographs of the ruins of industry in Richmond are key images of the War. An appendix lists the types of ordnance cast at Tredegar, from field artillery, to siege and seacoast artillery, to naval ordnance. The analytical index is another enticing feature of Dew's achievement. An excellent bibliographical essay delineates the foundation for the heroic task of taking the story further. A thorough history of the Southern iron industry during the nineteenth century, Dew admonishes us, is badly needed.

*Ironmaker to the Confederacy* is a virtual museum. About six years ago, I tried to persuade the family that still owns Tredegar to create a real one; meanwhile, a virtual one on the Web is a doable venture. Not only engineers would make repeated hits upon it, but so would scientists in other disciplines that were involved in the war effort.

The reissue of Dew's book suggests that we are given a second chance now to imagine the many possibilities for varied perspectives on technology in the South during its antebellum, war, and reconstruction periods. Between the first appearance of his groundbreaking study and its reprinting, Dew himself looked at the story of iron from another perspective in the magisterial *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge*.

Allow me to offer one general recommendation. Following Dew's exemplary lead, an historian with an interdisciplinary intellect and sensibility might undertake a myriad-minded overview of the many ways traditional and innovative technology played decisive roles in specific battles and other venues of the conduct of the War. Such a work would weave together a technological

survey, written in a lively style, fit for human emotional, imaginative, and intellectual consumption. Among the firsts, North and South, were the machine gun (not used until 1866), hand grenades, telescopic sights for rifles, repeating rifles, balloons, ironclad vessels, and electronically-exploded bombs and torpedoes.

Perhaps initially, the focus should be the South, because the outline of technological enterprise is starker there and could serve as an easily apprehensible model for such studies. A humanistic dimension would be to stitch into the factual tapestry the stories of the workers and their families, and their relationships to soldiers from their towns and environs. A model for that kind of multifaceted focus is Daniel E. Sutherland's *Seasons of War*. The University of Tennessee Press, which has focused our attention upon the work of the combat engineers who put technology and industry into action, serves as an example to other publishers, encouraging them to rise above the clash of iron and steel in battles to dwell a while upon the saga of technology.

*As founding director of the United States Civil War Center, David Madden conceived Civil War Book Review. He is editor of Beyond the Battlefield (2000) and The Legacy of Robert Penn Warren (2000), and author of the Civil War novel Sharpshooter (1996). Among his current projects are Letters from Soldiers: The Civil War and Myriadmindedness, which delineates a major advance in human learning.*