

In The Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863

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Review

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Ayers, Edward L. *In The Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863.* W.W. Norton & Company, \$27.95 ISBN 393057860

View from the Valley

Book compares Pennsylvania and Virginia counties

When Edward L. Ayers last published a book on the scale of his new one, **In the Presence of Mine Enemies**, he found himself defending what he called an experiment in narrative history. That work, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, appeared in 1992 and was greeted with many warm and enthusiastic reviews; but it also met with befuddlement and sharp criticism from some reviewers who saw it as shapeless, plodding, and non-committal. One professional journal even took the unusual step of inviting Ayers to submit an extended description and defense of his technique.

There should be no such disagreement this time around. **In the Presence of Mine Enemies**, the first installment of a planned series, is a fantastic, glittering jewel of a book. Ayers has not abandoned creative, analytical narrative. Nor has he abandoned his commitment to capturing the myriad voices and experiences of the past. His command of both in this book is masterful. The few flaws that exist in **Presence** are largely matters of taste, feel and one's creative sense. What to some will seem like missteps--say, interlaced italicized analysis, which ultimately does not distinguish one form of narration from another, as intended--will touch others as strokes of imaginative prowess--say, the creative fusion of the book's organization, pace, and rhythm to the 23rd Psalm.

And along the way readers might discover an odd if not ironic thrill. **In the Presence of Mine Enemies** is intended as a companion piece to the Valley of the Shadow project, the innovative digital archive launched a decade ago by Ayers and others at the University of Virginia. Yet the book, despite its connections to forward-looking technology, and for all of its emphasis on the

social impact of the Civil War, has a lyrical, old-fashioned appeal. Even the beautiful endpaper maps are reminiscent of the great war horses of traditional narrative.

Presence, like the Valley of the Shadow website, is built upon the experiences of people in two counties--Franklin County, Pennsylvania, where Chambersburg was the county seat; and Augusta County, Virginia, the seat of which was the important Confederate supply depot of Staunton. If taken too literally, the book's subtitle may provoke a spasmodic outcry from critics who argue that no single place could represent the Union or Confederate causes in microcosm. But both places do indeed reveal hopes and tensions common to people on either side of the firing line, and even across it. Both counties, Ayers argues, hesitated in their responses to crisis and secession; once the fighting started, people in Franklin and Augusta channeled cautious ambivalence into a deeper, more emotional and cathartic commitment to the war.

But they did not do so in unison, and they did not do so as actors in the triumphant if destructive forward march of American national ideals. People on both sides created and were caught in uncertain circumstances that Ayers uses to develop an overarching interpretative framework. The force of what Ayers calls deep contingency is essential to understanding everyday people and the war era, Ayers argues--not the sense of contingency that gives greater meaning and historical weight to events in James M. McPherson's classic *Battle Cry of Freedom*, but a more intimate, penetrating, and ultimately poignant interplay between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between local concerns and national events, between human choices and historical forces. A writer less polished might not have been able to straddle the scales and, at the same time, control a narrative that includes so many different voices; a writer more judgmental might have lost a sense of human emotion necessary to analyzing people, war, and choices. Yet Ayers is at his best while balancing hopes and fears, consensus and conflict, decisions made and decisions rejected. People in both counties displayed courage, commitment and sacrifice. People in both counties shirked, exploited, doubted, and took advantage of one another. And people in both counties went on with their everyday lives, even in the midst of war.

Some readers may find that deep contingency is not so much new as it is newly and freshly applied, others that the distinction between Ayers's social perspective of contingency and McPherson's military, political and civic one is too finely drawn. A deep contingency, for instance, is implied in McPherson's

usage despite his emphasis on national life. In *Battle Cry*, a meaningful new birth of freedom is awakened precisely because momentous events have ripple effects. On the other hand, the difference becomes less distinct as Ayers's narrative progresses. What unfolds in Franklin and Augusta unfolds in relationship to grand strategy, national politics, and, especially, the war in the east--the compasses by which ordinary people oriented themselves, their local concerns, and their experiences.

A second minor grievance arises as a result. Ayers's focus on the conventional war obscures the anxieties and distresses of the unconventional one. The omission is somewhat puzzling even if one allows for the book's stopping point in mid-1863--just before Gettysburg, and before the rapid deterioration of the partisan war or the rise of quasi-irregular operations, such as the burning of Chambersburg, in 1864. While conventional operations often made for an odd sense of order and rationality in war, as in the Union invasion of the Shenandoah Valley in 1862 or the Army of Northern Virginia's subsequent movements into Maryland and Pennsylvania, what drove fear and anxiety was the proximity of both counties to their foes. The emotional electricity on the border was generated by the tangible, profound sense that one could be in the presence of enemies at any moment. Indeed one suspects that it was that sense Ayers intended to capture in the book's subtitle. Yet the connection is largely underdeveloped. John D. Imboden, for example, appears early in the narrative as one of Ayers's central characters. He all but disappears after the first battle of Manassas--unfortunately so, since men like him justified the sloppy, violent, partisan war in the same language of home, family, and nation that Ayers so expertly teases out of the conventional war. (I know the people of the mountain counties, Imboden once wrote while explaining why his partisans would be successful, and they know me.)

None of these peccadilloes ultimately detract from **Presence**. Ayers is especially successful in fusing national debates about race and slavery to local opinion and circumstance. Free blacks and fugitive slaves, for example, appear in Franklin as the actors they were: as struggling laborers, shoeblacks, and cooks; potential recruits for John Brown's raid; recruits for the Union army; escapees along the Underground Railroad. But they were also objects of virulent scorn in Franklin, partly because of the county's proximity to the Virginia border. Augusta whites, on the other hand, spoke of defending home, but they were not skittish about framing that defense in terms of slavery, the fear of emancipation, and possible race war.

Readers familiar with the recent work on the war era will note Ayers's debt to it. In the vicious partisan political combat that characterized Franklin, for example, one sees support if not confirmation of Mark E. Neely Jr.'s new work on the party system in the North. In the timing of Augusta's movement toward an abstract sense of Confederate nationalism, one senses a process familiar to historians who see patriotic loyalty maturing by 1862. And yet readers should not troll through the notes looking for a comprehensive guide and commentary to secondary literature. The bibliographic stars here are the primary sources--newspapers, diaries, letters, court and census records--that are catalogued and accessible online at the Valley of the Shadow archive. That emphasis in part accounts for the book's appeal. What accounts for the rest of it--what accounts for a cup that runneth over in the richness of its rewards for the reader--is a historian of considerable grace, imagination, and power.

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