

Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War & Reconstruction

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Review

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Guelzo, Allen C. *Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War & Reconstruction*. Oxford University Press, \$19.95 ISBN 978-0-19-984328-2

A New Approach to Reconstruction

Readers of *Civil War Book Review* are going to want to read Allen C. Guelzo's sweeping history of the struggle to preserve the Union. The author of a number of prize-winning books centering on Lincoln, Guelzo, the Henry R. Luce III Professor of the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College and the Director of the college's Civil War Era Studies Program, aims *Fateful Lightning* at the general reader rather than the scholar, but there are insights and factual nuggets enough to excite the latter as well. Although he relies throughout on the massive secondary literature on the Civil War, *Fateful Lightning* is not exactly a synthesis. It is Guelzo's take on the Civil War and Reconstruction and the events leading up to the great crisis.

Guelzo begins his survey with an overview of the origins of the United States, aptly titled "A Nation Announcing Itself," concentrating on slavery in the new nation. His second chapter deals more specifically with the slavery issue in the politics of the 1840s and 1850s—"The Game of Balances," he calls it. Succeeding chapters describe Lincoln, the immediate events leading to secession, the first years of the war and the Emancipation Proclamation, the intermediate war years, and the final years of the struggle, and Reconstruction. Separate, intervening chapters describe life in the armies; financial and trade issues and diplomacy; and wartime race and gender issues ("World Turned Upside Down").

First and foremost, *Fateful Lightning* is a splendidly-written narrative. Guelzo has a genius for shimmering sketches of individuals, the telling anecdote, the absorbing vignette, the striking statistic. The narrative is intensely thematic within a general chronology. It sweeps the reader along; he/she won't want to

put it down. The clear, sturdy prose of James M. McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1989) and the straightforward lucidity of Jean H. Baker and Michael F. Holt's reworking of David Donald's *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (2001), for all their other virtues, do not compare in this regard.

As Guelzo stresses narrative, he eschews analysis. He freely gives his own, quite reasonable, if often trenchant opinions, but he does not organize his presentation to sustain them. Throughout, he tells a story. He illustrates and explains. He does not argue. Occasionally he will agree or disagree with another author, and he provides excellent and expansive suggestions for Further Reading. But his is aiming at a popular audience rather than a scholarly one. He does not contextualize *Fateful Lightning* within the immense historiographical literature on the Civil War and Reconstruction. Nor does Guelzo provide an over-arching theme. There is no clash of civilizations, as McPherson posits in *Battle Cry of Freedom*. The South wanted to protect its interests in slavery and was able to do so until Americans had to deal with the consequences of western expansion. This led to "The Game of Balances" he describes in his second chapter.

The inability to maintain the balance between slavery and freedom in the territories is what led to the war. In the one place where Guelzo deals thoroughly with the historiography in the text, he argues with force and clarity that there was nothing "irrational" about the political positions that led to secession and war. "Far from reeking of irrationality, secession and disunion were perfectly coherent and logical political choices within a political system that all along had confirmed that secession and disunion were viable options." Northerners and Southerners "struggled for workable compromises right down to the last minute, even while the room for creating nation-saving compromises narrowed" Thus, "the political system did not break down—the Southern states simply decided that it had fallen into the wrong hands and they would no longer choose to use it" (96). This lucid response to prior historical interpretations is the exception, however. There is no similar situating of Reconstruction in the historical literature. Neither "Dunning" nor "Foner" appears in the index to the text. Guelzo uses his Further Reading section to discuss historiographical debates, and they are an excellent resource for that information.

Despite the aiming for a popular audience, Guelzo does provide footnotes—real footnotes that appear at the foot of the page. Most of them cite the sources of his numerous, striking quotations, which he draws mostly from secondary rather than primary sources. Sometimes he leaves sweeping

descriptions and assertions undocumented. Other times he provides fuller documentation. It is not clear why there is such an inconsistency. But the citations do make clear that Guelzo relies largely on the secondary literature for his information, augmenting them with a number of original sources well-chosen for the insights and quotations that can be mined from them.

Guelzo is particularly good at describing and assessing Union and Confederate strategy. There is no arc to the story as he tells it. The outcome was not fore-ordained in his telling. The Confederate armies had to outlast the northern will to fight; Confederate leaders needed to turn a sentiment into true Confederate nationalism. They simply ran out of time. Guelzo's incisive accounts of battle tactics and the messy outcomes on the ground are compelling. He is equally good at describing army life in his chapter "The Soldier's Tale." This shimmering chapter is reminiscent of John Keegan's classic *The Face of Battle* (1976). In the following chapter he provides a wonderful description of the organizational effort that went into supplying the armies.

But Guelzo does give something up by his determination to provide a compelling narrative. He eschews precise chronology in favor of narrative flow; he disregards the nuance and complexity that might bog his story down. He oversimplifies issues. Jefferson was an agrarian while the Federalists were commercial. The South was agricultural while the North turned to manufacturing. Southerners turned away from the Whig party in the 1840s and 1850s because they suspected Whig support for federal intervention in the economy laid the groundwork for federal intervention with slavery. None of this is wrong, but few historians would say it really reflects the complexities of antebellum politics and public policymaking. Later, Guelzo, trained as an intellectual historian, organizes his discussion of wartime intellectual life around the contrast between Romanticism and Enlightenment liberalism—the former being less democratic than the latter. To a historian familiar with how the social-science orientation of many Civil War-era intellectuals translated into elitist calls for Civil Service Reform and undercut efforts to preserve democracy in the South, this dichotomy also seems simplistic. However, it serves to maintain a crisp narrative.

Nor does Guelzo inform readers that a juicy quote was actually written or uttered decades after the event it relates to; better to maintain the illusion of immediacy. In his chapter on changing race and gender relations, he spends more time on titillating accounts of women who pretended to be men in order to join

the fighting than he does on the way the war affected women at the home front. In his chapter "The Manufacture of War," he spends more space on the excitement of blockade-running and the Confederate effort to break the noose (a terrific account of the *Merrimac* and the *Monitor*) than he does on the more mundane changes in home-front economy.

Finally, his discussions of constitutional issues and of Reconstruction—my areas of expertise—are disappointing. Guelzo knows better than almost anyone that constitutional issues were central to the political debates of the war and Reconstruction but he never fully explains them, nor does he describe how consummately Lincoln presented his constitutional vision to the people. His discussion of crucial court cases seems superficial and occasionally marred by errors. (John Sanford, the defendant in the Dred Scott case, was a citizen of New York, not Missouri. A loss in *The Prize Cases* would not have "undercut the operation of the blockade," which by then was authorized by Congress (225). The *Milligan* case did not hold that the military "had no business trying civilians;" it held that it could not do so in peaceful areas where the civil courts were open (226). The Civil Rights Act was not passed in response to *U.S. v. Cruikshank* [1876], which was decided after the Congress passed the law.) His interpretation of Reconstruction is oddly Dunningite—he rejects Dunning's racism but portrays the Radical Republicans Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens as the gurus behind Republican Reconstruction policy, ignoring decades of research demonstrating that it was Republican centrists rather than radicals who fashioned it. Once again, Guelzo sacrifices nuance for the sake of clear storyline.

Despite these caveats, *Fateful Lightning* is a book no one fascinated by the Civil War should miss. It is a marvelous read. If they want nuance and historiographical context, college instructors might prefer one of the standard textbooks. McPherson's very well-written synthesis will probably retain its place as the standard account. But if instructors are willing to bring nuance, historical complexity, and historiography into the classroom themselves and through supplemental readings, their students will thank them for introducing them Guelzo's gripping narrative of events.

Michael Les Benedict is professor emeritus of history at the Ohio State University. He continues to publish, speak, and lead workshops and seminars in American legal and constitutional history and the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction. His most recent book in this area is Preserving the Constitution:

Essays on the Constitution and Politics in the Civil War Era (2006).