

### The Battlefield and Beyond: Essays on the American Civil War

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## Review

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**Jewett, Clayton E.** *The Battlefield and Beyond: Essays on the American Civil War*. Louisiana State University Press, \$47.50 ISBN 978-0-8071-4355-1

### Fresh Perspectives on Civil War Study

Placing Jefferson Davis and George Gershwin in the same volume on the Civil War is not a task for the faint of heart. But then, assembling a celebratory work offers an editor the latitude not always available to the author of a monograph. Clayton Jewett put together this fascinating and occasionally rambling collection in tribute to the personal and professional contributions of historian Jon Wakelyn.

Readers who have an interest in the Confederacy will be excited about the first half of the volume. Essays on military, political, social, and cultural topics are generally well written and thoroughly documented by first-rate scholars. Several articles retrace and reinforce existing notions, while others break new ground and will stir conversation among both amateur and professional historians alike. For example, race is an escapable theme, and Orville Burton explores the “silence of a slaveholder” in his piece on South Carolinian James B. Griffin. Griffin’s paternalism and *naiveté* about his slaves and their aspirations as well as their conflicting ideas of freedom and liberty are reflected in his letters. Leonne M. Hudson documents the commitment of Robert E. Lee to the arming of southern black soldiers late in the war. Though Lee opposed slavery as morally wrong, he viewed blacks as inferior and bondage the best system available. Practical matters—manpower shortages—prompted the general to engage publicly in this heated and controversial issue. Congress finally approved such a measure in March 1865, but recruitment lagged. More importantly, Hudson argues, “The passage of the law was clear evidence that the Confederacy was on life support” (44).

Daniel Sutherland explores the role of guerrilla warfare in the success—and demise—of the Confederacy. Challenging the concept that the South should have increased their aggressive guerrilla operations, Sutherland posits the view that the out-of-control rebels did more harm than good. Dixie's democratic mindset, founded on a "Swamp Fox" image, resonated with Southerners who believed in the ideals of individualism and freedom. However, when their partisan style of warfare disintegrated into outlawry, vengeance, and retribution, Richmond and the overall war effort suffered. Too much democracy and localism not only damaged public support in the South, but contributed to the Union's policy of total war and retaliation.

The life and leadership of Jefferson Davis receives attention in several essays. Paul Escott deals with Davis directly as president, laying out a well-considered and balanced argument incorporating the factors that impacted both Davis's decisions and his historical reputation. Escott recognizes his subject's personal and political strengths and weaknesses, contending that the home front was his greatest failure. A prisoner of his class, Davis could neither empathize with the suffering nor aid the southern masses. In balance, Escott contends Davis should be credited with resolutely leading an innovative Confederate revolution that strengthened the central government and military, and built a wartime economy. Conversely, he should be blamed for fostering sectional hatred of Yankees well after the war had concluded. Herman Hattaway uses Davis as a parallel vehicle to offer a defense of the career and contributions of General Stephen D. Lee. Carolinian by birth, Mississippian by residence, Lee possibly found more distinction after 1865, as university president and with the United Confederate Veterans, than during the war.

Clayton Jewett offers a more critical view of Davis and the Richmond bureaucracy, dealing with the career and thought of Texas Congressman Williamson S. Oldham. Oldham emerges as a disciple of Old Republican Lockean principles of states' rights, damning conscription, the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, and corruption in the cotton trade as representative abuses of the Davis administration. For Jewett, Oldham-- not Davis-- is the heroic figure; "a beacon of hope for the preservation of freedom and liberty" (210). The impressment of cotton in Texas emerges again in Judith F. Gentry's article on the leadership of Edmund Kirby Smith in the Trans-Mississippi West in 1863. Where Jewett (and Oldham) view the seizure of cotton as a "bottom-up" violation of individual rights and a victimization of the planters, Gentry (and Smith) see a "top-down" need for the military to garner enough cotton to pay for

critical imported goods—especially rifles. Smith encountered strong opposition from the Texas legislature and his efforts proved less than successful. Gentry contends that the general had a daunting task in raising the necessary supplies and manpower to defend three states. In fact, the failures at Vicksburg and Port Hudson should more properly be placed at the feet of Davis, the Congress, or Secretary of War James Seddon, than the steadfast Kirby Smith.

The geographic “outlier” among the collection is Michael J. Connolly’s interesting piece on the plight of New England editors, ship owners, and Democratic politicians who dared to challenge the policies of the administration or were suspected of disloyalty in 1861. From Boston to Bangor, Lincoln loyalists were in no mood for protest or discord. Mobs destroyed presses and offices while sheriffs arrested suspected “southern sympathizers.” The line between dissent and treason was often crossed as vigilante justice prevailed and community order preserved. Importantly, Connolly contends, the quick and violent response of Yankee Republicans meant that the South could count on few visible northern allies for support and sympathy.

The second half of the book provides an eclectic journey through Reconstruction and historical memory. David Kyvig examines the role of original intent in the Constitution and the problem of slavery. The Founding Fathers deflected the issue to later generations and concurrently made the process of amendment difficult. Kyvig illustrates his points discussing the efforts to prevent or resolve the secession crisis as well as a treatment of the passage of the three Civil War amendments. A new constitutional philosophy emerged from the war that provided for the use of amendments to help enlarge the mandate for authority of the federal government to enact social and political change. Bertram Wyatt-Brown conducts an intriguing exploration into the life, mind, and temperament of John Wilkes Booth. This psychological portrayal reveals a brilliant, but disturbed, individual whose life was shaped by traditional southern society and dysfunctional family relationships. Wyatt-Brown convincingly details the evolution of Booth’s hatred for the president and the social milieu in which his mania festered towards its deadly outcome.

Many readers will be enlightened and intrigued by Alan Kraut’s argument that a bond emerged between some Jewish immigrants and Southerners in the late nineteenth century who endured a common sense of historical disaster, victimization, and suffering. Dr. Joseph Goldberger made a major contribution to public health with his lengthy studies of pellagra debilitating Mississippi

prisoners and Carolina mill workers. The controversial results, which demonstrated that diet rather than germs caused the malady, earned the doctor national recognition. Concurrently, George Gershwin penned songs for Tin Pan Alley and Al Jolson before turning his pioneering talents to a jazz-infused *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris* in the 1920s. The desire to write a jazz opera juxtaposed itself with Edwin D. Heyward's novel *Porgy* to inspire Gershwin's classic *Porgy and Bess* in 1935. Gershwin traveled to South Carolina to refine his understanding of southern black culture. Still, the play met with mixed critical reviews in New York, lost money, and closed after a limited run. Two years later, Gershwin tragically died of a brain hemorrhage.

Reconciliation rather than revenge rules the day on Civil War battlefields. Kenneth Nivison expertly explains how Gettysburg—arguably the greatest Union victory—evolved into a place of remembrance and reunion in which there were no victors, only brave Americans dying for their nations. Nivison emphasizes the role of battlefield chronicler John Badger Bachelder and Little Round Top hero Joshua Chamberlain in crafting a mythology in which the war had no apparent causes beyond self-serving politicians and states' rights—certainly not slavery. The rush to “Americanize” the battle and usher in a new nationalism hit a high note with Woodrow Wilson's speech at the Peace Jubilee of 1913. Ultimately, Civil War memory and the role of emancipation have been seriously compromised by commercialism and a blameless war. While the monuments and memory at Gettysburg apparently thrive, such is not the case with the Confederate White House. Emory Thomas provides an amusing and touching series of personal anecdotes spanning four decades of his own experiences at the museum in Richmond. His essay is a history of the site and its value to scholars and the public, and, importantly, shouts a clarion call for rational leadership and support to sustain its mission.

Jon Wakelyn is best known for his extensive and well-received editing projects on southern/Confederate history. We should not be surprised that the rare essay in this volume deals with the Union during the war. Editor Jewett takes the reader on a journey through place and time dealing with wide-ranging topics that are inevitably interesting and often offer new perspectives. Articles abound to satisfy those who seek military and political history, yet enough non-traditional topics engage the culturally curious. Civil War enthusiasts who explore this collection selectively cannot help but be rewarded.

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