

Routes of War: the World of Movement in the Confederate South

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Recommended Citation

Roark, James L. (2012) "Routes of War: the World of Movement in the Confederate South," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.4.29

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss4/28>

Review

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Fall 2012

Sternhell, Yael A. *Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South*. Harvard University Press, \$49.95 ISBN 978-0-674-06442-3

Understanding the Civil War through Movement

"I seen our 'Federates go off laughin' an' gay; full of life an' health," a former slave from Alabama remembered. "Dey was big an' strong, asingin' Dixie an' dey just knowed dey was agoin' to win. An' boss, I seen 'em come back skin an' bone, dere eyes all sad an' hollow, an' dere clothes all ragged. Boss, dey was all lookin' sick. De sperrit dey lef' wid jus' been done whupped outten dem" (167). Countless scenes of jubilant departures and despairing homecomings took place on the roads, railroads, and rivers of the Confederacy – the "routes of war." Professor Yael Sternhell asks us to consider carefully what these experiences meant to those who traveled the routes and to those who witnessed the nearly endless spectacle. It's not easy to say something fresh about the American Civil War; truly pioneering studies are few and far between. But Sternhell provides a decidedly new vantage point from which to view the war and to understand what it meant to Southerners - soldiers, slaves, and civilians. As she demonstrates, much is gained by leaving behind the battlefields and home fronts – the traditional sites of Civil War history – and focusing on "the routes that ran between them" (8).

For many Southerners, soldiers moving down Confederate roads were the first tangible proof of the existence of the new nation. Civilians thrilled at the sight of thousands of men pushing toward the front. That pageant of power and southern unity filled observers with optimism about the national project. Soldiers, the "physical realization of Southern nationalism" (20), helped usher civilians into their new identities as Confederate citizens. Battle zones were filled with men on the move, and marching not only became the soldiers' central experience, but it became part of the daily lives of civilians as well. They learned to read the roads, to judge the war's progress by what they observed. Rumors ran

riot, but visible evidence - the army's size, the appearance of the soldiers, the condition of the animals – did not lie.

Soldiers were not the only Southerners on the move. Runaway slaves and civilian refugees moved along the same roads. At least 500,000 slaves fled farms and plantations in search of freedom with Union armies. Sarah Poindexter, a former slave, remembered how she learned of emancipation. "I sho' recall de excitement in de neighborhood when roving crowds of niggers come 'long de big road, shoutin' and singin' dat all niggers am free" (93). Sometimes masters hit the roads first. Perhaps a quarter of a million white Southerners fled ahead of Union armies. To witness elite Southerners in flight raised serious questions about the fate of the Old Order. Moreover, Confederate deserters, stragglers, and skulkers increasingly moved against the stream of their advancing units. Eventually, roads jammed with broken armies, refugees, and runaway slaves announced the destruction of the Confederate cause.

In *Routes of War*, Yael Sternhell, who teaches at Tel Aviv University, provides an exciting new way to view and to evaluate the experiences of civilians and soldiers. She convincingly argues that movement along the Confederacy's routes of war shaped both participant and observer. The theater of the road provides a window on to the "process of state formation, of social revolution, of the transformation of white Southerners into a people at war. . ." (10). As fresh and as insightful as this study is, it has its limits. Sternhell readily admits that not all of the Confederacy became a war zone. Her story focuses on the eastern theater, really Virginia. For Southerners who lived in more tranquil areas (and millions did), movement on the roads proved far less central to their wartime experience. Without the pageantry of the road, did Confederate nationalism look different there? And occasionally the concept of movement seems a little dull as an analytical tool. Mobility was central to Hannibal's quest to destroy Rome, to Napoleon's drive to conquer Russia, and to Lee's and Jackson's struggle to defeat Union armies in Virginia, Sternhell tells us. Yes, but I'm not sure what we gain by bringing those facts to the forefront. On the whole, however, she successfully transforms a commonplace of war – movement – into a stunningly original interpretation of the Confederacy, a story, she says, that "remained hidden in plain sight" (10). We know now that visual evidence built loyalty to the new nation and visual evidence in time undermined it.

James L. Roark is the author of Masters without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction and co-author of The American Promise: A

History of the United States (*5th edition*).