

Children and Youth During the Civil War Era

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Review

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Marten, James (ed.) *Children and Youth During the Civil War Era*. New York University Press, \$25.00 ISBN 978-0-8147-9608-5

New Study Assesses Children's Wartime Experience

At the start of the American Civil War, half of all Americans were sixteen years of age or younger. Not that one regularly encounters evidence of this striking demographic fact in historical literature on the nineteenth-century US. Despite the sustained efforts of two generations of historians to tell the stories of previously neglected groups of Americans – including women, people of color, and members of the working-class – children and young people remain radically underrepresented in historical scholarship relative to their numbers. *Children and Youth During the Civil War Era* helps address this gap in the historical record. The collection of thirteen essays, edited by leading historian of childhood, James Marten, covers an admirably broad range of topics related to the era of the American Civil War.

Given the assorted essays' diverse engagements, it is difficult to extract a single thesis. Marten's introduction, however, does outline some broad historiographical engagements. First and foremost, the collection engages with historiography on the emergence and development of 'modern' childhood throughout the mid-nineteenth century. As many of the essays argue, the trials of the era – including slavery, sectional conflict, warfare, economic transformation, emancipation, and Reconstruction – helped shape and were themselves shaped by incipient notions of children's innocence, moral virtue, and need for protection from the world's manifold dangers. A second engagement involves the place of children in African-American families and communities, in slavery and in freedom. Contributing to a long and venerable historiographic tradition, several of the essays explore how people of color struggled to maintain family ties and retain control over children and their labor before, during, and after the American Civil War. A third and final theme addresses the role of children and

young people in creating and popularizing the pro-southern ‘Lost Cause’ interpretation of the war. Coming of age at the end of the nineteenth century, children of the Civil War era, as several of the authors suggest, were among the most enthusiastic supporters of the infamous myth, and did much to effect some of the era’s most loathsome political and social changes.

These themes are distributed across four chronologically-organized sections. The first deals with the pre-war years; the second, with the years 1861 to 1865; and the third with the decade of Reconstruction and those that immediately followed it. A fourth and final section, consisting of a single essay, deals with the implications of the memory of the Civil War and the ‘Lost Cause’ in the twentieth century. The essays in each section are engaging and empirically rich. The volume’s contributors – many of whom are recently-minted scholars – do a laudable job of uncovering untapped bodies of source material and shedding light on revealing stories that contribute to a fuller understanding of how children and young people, as well as ideas about childhood and youth, shaped the history of the period.

Among the most compelling essays in the collection are those by Judith Geisberg and Victoria E. Ott. Geisberg’s entry on the history on Pennsylvania’s Soldier’s Orphans Schools demonstrates how changing ideas of race, class, and childhood combined to create a toxic political environment for the schools’ ongoing existence. While the children in the story are largely stripped of agency – they are simply subject to buffeting political winds – her work nevertheless reveals the ways in which debates about children were central to the postwar social and political landscape. Ott, on the other hand, weaves a persuasive tale about the complex political implications of elite young southern women’s courtship activities during and after the Civil War. She shows, for instance, how the attitudes of the section’s young women toward potential suitors became a way of expressing loyalty to the Confederacy, as well as their future hopes for the perpetuation of class and racial privilege after the war. Taken together, the essays showcase the rich potential of scholarship on childhood and youth.

Other essays in the collection address a variety of topics. Complimentary pieces by Rebecca de Schweinitz and Elizabeth Kuebler-Wolf, for instance, address the prominent but divergent role of children in abolitionist and proslavery textual and visual rhetoric prior to the war, while an article by Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai examines how elite northeastern college students’ New England-centered vision of US history shaped their vehement response to

southern sectionalism and secession. Another set of essays explores the opportunities and challenges that the war itself offered children and young people: opportunities for adolescent rebellion and participation in a growing consumer print culture; the challenges of confronting death and, in the case of Southern children, invasion and occupation as well. Essays on the postwar period, meanwhile, deal with important categories of young people created by the conflict and its aftermath: formerly enslaved young people and soldiers' orphans. Entries by Troy L. Kicker and Mary Niall Mitchell, for example, deal with the question of recently freed children's education and labor, while Catherine A. Jones's essay deals with the children of deceased soldiers in the South and North, respectively. Finally, an essay by J. Vincent Lowery concerning the Children of the Confederacy and Civil War memory in the Civil Rights era closes the book.

The collection's value is twofold. Although few of the individual pieces dramatically alter existing interpretations of sectional conflict, slavery, the Civil War, or Reconstruction, their consistent attention to the question of age provides a healthy corrective to the latter subject's chronic neglect in historical scholarship. While issues of age and life cycle are making more frequent appearances in histories of nineteenth-century America, this collection reveals many remaining gaps in the scholarship. *Children and Youth During the Civil War Era* will be of greatest interest, however, to undergraduate instructors looking for an accessible introduction to the topic. The individual essays are short and readable, and require little knowledge of extant historiography, while the book itself comes complete with a list of questions for discussion and thirty pages of primary source material. Meanwhile, the Kindle edition price tag puts the volume well within the budget of even the most frugal scholar.

The limitations of this volume are less obvious than its virtues. A bit more analytic adventurousness, for instance, might have improved this collection. The authors' archival work is admirable, and their stories competently rendered, but their essays manifest a general aversion to challenging the long-standing traditions of Civil War-era scholarship. Thus, the essays do much to enrich and add nuance to our understanding of the key events of the period, but could have easily done more to alter our interpretation.

A few additional paragraphs of introductory methodological clarification also would have done much to elucidate the subject of this volume. Without them, readers are left wondering whether the book is more interested in the

experiences of flesh-and-blood children (the subject of roughly half the essays), or the million-and-one ways that ideas and images of children and youngsters were deployed by parents, teachers, politicians, ministers, and many others throughout the period (the subject of the other half). This is no small distinction: it's as wide as the gap between Ira Berlin's *Slaves Without Masters*, a social history of free African-Americans in the antebellum US South, and George Fredrickson's *The Black Image in the White Mind*, an intellectual history of racism over the course of the nineteenth-century. By leaving this gap unaddressed, the editor seems to imply that the thoughts and actions of individual boys and girls were roughly coincidental with the moralistic and sentimental tales their elders spun about them – a conclusion Professor Marten and his contributors would surely reject. These criticisms notwithstanding, *Children and Youth During the Civil War Era* is a welcome and useful addition to both Civil War-era historical scholarship and the history of America's children.

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