

Smithsonian Civil War: Inside the National Collection

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Review

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Kagan, Neil *Smithsonian Civil War: Inside the National Collection*.
Smithsonian Books, \$40.00 ISBN 9781588343895

A History Lesson through Objects

A good historian is, to some extent, also an archaeologist. Historians of the Civil War are lucky in the sense that the conflict was as much a war of words as a physical conflict, but it is clear that ideology alone did not win the war for the North or lose it for the South. If we are to fully understand the war, we have to understand its material culture as well as its intellectual origins.

Smithsonian Civil War: Inside the National Collection tries to help us do just that. Described as “an exhibit between hard covers,” the 368-page book draws on the resources of thirteen Smithsonian museums and archives and contains more than 150 examples of artifacts that helped shape the war’s outcome or have affected how we remember it. It can be browsed, like an exhibit, or read from cover to cover, the contents having been arranged more or less chronologically. Accompanying each item is an insightful essay written by Smithsonian curators. Though the book does assume some prior knowledge of the Civil War, it is intended primarily for general readers.

Written in part to “challenge our conceptions of the American experience,” some parts of the book would be useful for teaching people to think critically about material aspects of the Civil War. For example, item 82, an engraved woodblock used to print an image in the *New York Illustrated News*, is a lesson in the history of communication that could start a conversation about how the nineteenth-century news media functioned. Item 39, a British-made copper plate for printing five-cent Confederate stamps that was seized en route to South Carolina, illustrates how hard it was for the South to do even relatively simple things, like printing stamps, let alone something as complicated as providing regular mail service.

Several objects in the book are things that everyone who has studied the Civil War has heard about but may not actually have seen, such as slave identification badges, homespun cloth, hardtack (made into a picture frame!), surgical tools, artificial limbs, a burial post, and a telegraph receiver and transmitter. Numerous examples of Civil War-era guns have been included, along with uniforms, which readers used to seeing the war through black-and-white photographs and engravings will enjoy seeing in color. The home front is not neglected, and items such as sheet music remind us that even Americans who lived far from the scene of battle would have been able to participate, in a small way, from their front parlor.

“One of the truly wonderful things about working at the Smithsonian is the opportunity to pull open a drawer and encounter an object that was instrumental in shaping the nation, reveals an untold story, or simply makes the often-mythic past more real,” the book’s editors have written. A particularly striking example of how an artifact can make the past seem “more real” is item 13, a map stained with the blood of Massachusetts antislavery activist David Starr Hoyt, who went to “Bleeding Kansas” in 1856 and was killed by proslavery settlers. The book also shows a pike and three guns carried by John Brown in Kansas and at Harper’s Ferry. Several items are devoted to Abraham Lincoln, including a bloodstained cuff worn by actress Laura Keane, who cradled the president’s head in her lap after he was shot at Ford’s Theater. One of the Smithsonian’s greatest treasures, a top hat worn by Lincoln, is included, with a discussion of how this simple item of clothing was actually a very powerful player on the stage of history.

The book also shares some interesting, little-known facts about the history of the Smithsonian itself. For example, several Congressmen had opposed creating a museum that was part of the government, but among its earliest regents was none other than Jefferson Davis. Its first secretary, Joseph Henry, a distinguished scientist with Southern leanings, disliked the institution’s museum aspect and wanted it to be primarily a place for the study of science, not history. But just as the Civil War transformed the nation, “The Smithsonian itself was transformed by the conflict,” and by the late nineteenth century, it had fully embraced its mission to preserve historical artifacts and use them to educate the public.

Though designed for a general audience, *Smithsonian Civil War* contains many never-before-published images of items from the institution’s collections

and therefore may be of interest to scholars looking for new topics of research. It should certainly be on any Civil War buff's bookshelf, and many public and academic libraries will also wish to acquire a copy of it.

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