

### The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War

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## Review

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**Drake, Brian Allen** *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War*. University of Georgia Press, \$69.95  
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### Environmental History More than “Waving the Muddy Shirt”

The works contained in *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War* are groundbreaking, not only for their content but also for their potential to expand the connections between the two subfields of history: Civil War and Environmental. The editor, Brian Allen Drake of University of Georgia, argues effectively that the environment where watershed moments take place can no longer be considered merely the scenery; it is part of the human experience, the environment is shaped by human activity, it shapes human history, and cannot be ignored because it is a major portion of the human experience. He asserts that like military, gender, race, and social histories of the Civil War, “an environmental-history approach *can* tell us many things we didn’t know before and can also allow us to reassess some things we *thought* we knew (3).”

Drake is an expert at recognizing unique historical connections in his own work and used this skill in choosing the thought provoking articles that fill this volume. In the introduction Drake demonstrates how the lens of environmental history can be, and why it should be, applied liberally to additional subfields of history. Drake hopes that the “methodological smorgasbord” covered in the book will inspire a new wave of environmental studies on the Civil War because, the subject pool remains is quite vast. Historian Paul Sutter explains in the epilogue that everyone knows that the Civil War was fought outdoors in the environment, but this book does more than merely “wave the muddy shirt” and say the environment matters, *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green* demonstrates how using an environmental lens, can help historians look into the very *matter* of the War.

Although the chapters are not organized thematically, there is a nice flow to the volume and all contributing authors deserve merit. Kenneth Noe investigates the significance of weather events and natural surroundings on Civil War battles and campaigns in chapter one. He finds that more than forty-percent were plagued by noteworthy inclement conditions affecting the outcomes. Noe argues that climate did more than shape the outcome of the battles though, it effected the daily life of soldiers in camp and civilians on the home front; it hampered battle plans, arms production and slowed war shipments significantly. One of his main goals in researching how climate affected the Civil War was to show how interdisciplinary studies can help expand our understanding of nature and human responses.

Chapter two, like many others, investigates a specific place or region involved in the Civil War. Written by Megan Kate Nelson, it examines the difficulties of fighting a drawn out campaign in the Southwest, where supplies were not easily accessible, and the environment sets limits on human actions. Nelson convincingly explains how the heat and lack of fresh water supplies, not military incompetence, compelled Major Isaac Lynde to surrender to Confederate forces. Chapters three, six, eight, and nine also explore specific places in the geography of the Civil War, but the case study presented by Timothy Silver in chapter three is the most noteworthy. Silver traces the Black Mountain Boys Company from the home front in Yancey County, North Carolina, into the battle field, and back again. The article examines the local community not only for their roles during the War, but also traces how high enlistment/impressment rates led to absences in the agricultural centered area and the results. Like Noe, Silver connects the local importance of climate and weather events to the broader picture of the Civil War and finds many correlations. Silver does an excellent job of providing equal space in his study for both human and natural players alike.

Chapters five, six, seven, and ten center on the use of art and literature in environmental histories and all four are thought provoking and well researched. Lisa M. Brady, author of chapter seven, endeavors to demonstrate how the analytical approaches of military and environmental history have converging points using what nineteenth-century military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, referred to as "friction." Clausewitz argued that every battle was unique and contained an element of uncertainty, or friction, for which they could not prepare; one of the examples he gave for friction, was nature. However, he did not stop there to environmental historians delight, Clausewitz said that nature is

not an element of chance, that it must be understood as a major player with full agency; something environmental historians have said for over years. The linguistic bridge Brady identifies hopefully will result in more military and environmental crossover studies.

In the tradition of saving the best for last, chapter four by Kathryn Shively Meier entitled "The Man Who Has Nothing to Lose," is by far the most intriguing from both a military standpoint and an environmental one. Meier investigates the most common action of Civil War soldiers which resulted in disciplinary actions, straggling. She finds that by using an environmental lens to research stragglers their true purpose can be revealed; it was a form of self-care and used not for the intentions of disobeying, but for survival. The history of the war is not complete without mentioning the unsanitary and putrescent conditions of the hospital tents, but Meier alters our perceptions of the topic and assures the reader, that even the lowest man on the totem pole understood the risks of entering those repugnant first aid stations. Through the use of primary resources and medical records, the author found that soldiers straggled in order to improve their health through the use of familiar and traditional medicines. However, their getaways in the woods also resulted in improved morale because the men would return well rested and mentally ready for battle again. Although punishment would almost certainly come, Meier explains that in life-or-death situations, the soldiers came to realize that they could not always rely on the medical staff employed by the army to help them survive.

*The Blue, the Gray, and the Green* is the fourth installment in the UnCivil War Series from the University of Georgia Press, which investigates the Civil War in unconventional and fresh ways. Drake's work is something the subfield of military history should embrace fully, because at times studies on the topic of war can feel ancient. These ten wonderful chapters help re-think the Civil War, bringing the reader not only the minds of great leaders and individual soldiers, but their environment as well.

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