

Approaching Civil War and Southern History

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Review

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Cooper, William J. *Approaching Civil War and Southern History*. Louisiana State University Press, 2019. \$38.00 ISBN 9780807170588

In retrospective snapshots looking across a long and distinguished scholarly career, *Approaching the Civil War and Southern History* collects together ten essays written by William J. Cooper, Boyd Professor Emeritus at Louisiana State University. Individually these essays, initially published between 1970 and 2012, broadly examine a variety of topics in the Civil War-era South ranging from the leadership of Jefferson Davis to an analysis of the viability of cotton production. Taken together they highlight the clear argumentation and lucid prose that has long been a hallmark of William Cooper's work.

Perhaps best known for his studies of politics and political leadership in the South—including *The Conservative Regime: South Carolina, 1877-1890*, *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860*, and *Jefferson Davis, American*, among others—this volume differs in that it also reprints a few of the lesser-known projects Cooper published over the last forty years.

Specifically, the book begins with a reassessment of the political and military leadership of Jefferson Davis, an essay that had its origins in Cooper's senior thesis at Princeton. Cooper contends that late in the war Davis was in fact a flexible and politically astute commander in chief in the west: his selection of P.G.T. Beauregard to command the Military Division of the West adeptly created a solution for the reputation of General Beauregard and gave Hood mentorship in the field at the same time Davis's four public speeches reassured citizens in Macon, Montgomery, Augusta, and Columbia. Readers can glimpse the beginnings of a longer scholarly focus on Jefferson Davis that came twenty years later for Cooper. This trajectory is brought full-circle by essay eight reprinted from *The Papers of Jefferson Davis* that examines Davis's post-war attempt to find meaning and purpose between 1865 and 1870.

Another subset of three essays focuses on the secession crisis. In essay five Cooper begins to extend arguments on the significance of the politics of slavery from his earlier work

The South and the Politics of Slavery into the years 1860, an argument that later formed the core of his book *Liberty and Slavery*. Essay nine, originally Cooper's presidential address to the Southern Historical Association in 2010, re-evaluates the role Congress played in the course of secession noting that the Republicans' inflexible stance on slavery in the territories was the push that drove the Deep South to secede. Essay ten looks at the same time period from Abraham Lincoln's point of view, exploring why Lincoln did not support Congressional attempts at compromise in the winter of 1860-61 despite believing in the ideals of Henry Clay.

Mirroring a commitment to students throughout his career at LSU, essay three grew out of a collaborative research task shared with students in his graduate seminar. Together they sought to address the question of soil exhaustion and comparative cotton yields to explore the supposed cotton crisis of the 1850s. Later published in the journal *Agricultural History*, the essay demonstrates no actual crisis existed in the minds of planters at the time or with the fertility of their fields, and slavery was in no real threat from a geographical or climate-based limit as posited by historian Charles Ramsdell.

In total, this volume reprints four journal articles, three book chapters, and three book introductions. Each essay has an introduction where Cooper reflects on the chronological and historiographical context that informed it, and he also includes a short preface to the book. While half of the essays share some topical overlap as noted above, on the whole the collection shares no thematic arc beyond that of Cooper's career. In the end, the book is best read as discrete entries showcasing the strength of Cooper's immense research and argumentation skills, not unlike a coffee-table photo album of memories across a scholarly lifetime.

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