

Rethinking the Civil War Era: Directions for Research

Wang Xi

Peking University, wangxi@iup.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Xi, Wang (2020) "Rethinking the Civil War Era: Directions for Research," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.22.1.25

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol22/iss1/25>

Review

Wang Xi

Winter 2020

Escott, Paul D. *Rethinking the Civil War Era: Directions for Research*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky Press, 2018. HARDCOVER. \$50.00 ISBN: 9780813175355. pp. 204.

By writing *Rethinking the Civil War Era: Directions for Research*, Paul Escott, the Reynolds Professor of History at Wake Forest University and a renowned historian of American slavery and Civil War, has done a valuable service to his peers. The book reviews a wide range of recent scholarships in Civil War history, organized by six themes – the roots of the war, wartime societies, African Americans and the Civil War, military history, environmental impact of the war, and the war’s consequences. In addition, the book offers an informative and user-friendly discussion of how new techniques of digital age can help Civil War historians to expand and deepen their inquiries. Escott may have shared the ambition of some of his predecessors – such as Thomas J. Pressly who published *American Interpret Their Civil War* (1965) and James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper, who edited *Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand* (1998) – to offer a report of the state of the field, but he disclaims the intent of producing “a comprehensive historiographic review of the existing literature or to offer ideas on every potentially important area of inquiry” in the field. His goal is to “present chapters that focus on issues and questions to which I think I can contribute” to “our collective research enterprise” (pp. xi-xii). Still, the listing of 243 monographs, book chapters and journal articles in the book’s bibliography provides him a solid foundation to discuss the field’s new “directions for research.” Escott’s style of writing is also unique. He mixes critical historiographic reviews with reflective commentaries of “personal tone” and probing suggestions for further inquiry. In a way, the book reads like a densely composed lecture that an experienced instructor prepares for a graduate seminar devoted to modern Civil War historiography.

Escott opens each chapter with a brief introduction that outlines the thematic scope and highlights the novelties of recent scholarship as compared to the past. He subsequently reviews significant works by subject, summarizing and comparing authors’ arguments and frequently

commenting on their methodological innovations. Chapter 1 covers the causes of the Civil War and Escott reviews historians' inquiries in a number of new directions, including the interactions of different economic forces and financial interests, the role of border regions, race and racism, mob violence, regional attachments to the central government. These new studies, in his view, not only help produce "a much fuller, more compelling sense of the forces behind the sectional conflict" (p. 3) but also prompt historians to rethink the real nature of prewar southern economy, the role of international capitalism, various southern attitudes toward the secession and war.

In Chapter 2, "Understanding Societies in War," Escott reviews a wide range of monographs that study wartime regional and local Union and Confederate forces, guerrilla warfare, nationalisms of different brands and their makings, federal fiscal and economic policies, practices of dealing with political oppositions, divisive partisan politics, gender relations, citizenship and, very importantly, wartime racism as experienced by black soldiers and freedmen. While warmly embracing the impressive new scholarship of New Social History, Escott advises historians "to be more conscious of differences affecting particular regions, varying circumstances, and military situations" (p. 22). Some of his questions in this chapter, especially those concerning the evolution of wartime capitalism and its impact on northern workers' rights in postwar society, are especially enlightening since they link the wartime tensions to the later "challenges of Reconstruction" (p. 43).

The subfield of African Americans and the Civil War, Escott notes, has witnessed a great increase in investigation for the past generation. However, he reminds historians that "much remains to be explored." Recent historiography has been "romantically positive" about the success and achievements of African Americans, but since "African Americans were a very diverse population at the time of the Civil War and their history is many sided." As a result, historians must "tell a unified history of a group so varied and affected by such different circumstances" (pp. 44-45). The new directions he suggests include class relations within black communities, the role of African Americans in the Confederacy, slaves' roles during the Civil War (in addition to their escapes from slavery that had ultimately led to the shift of Union's policy toward emancipation), slaves' diverse attitudes toward emancipation and their perceptions about American nation and democracy, the roots of black nationalism, gender relations among freedmen, the life of black

soldiers, the “cultural gap” between northern blacks and southern freedmen and the experience of black migrants after the war. Escott’s concerns beneath these suggested directions lie in line with his overall caution that historians, as product of their time, could have been overwhelmed by certain dominant ideological outlooks but still need to present a full history of “a people who lived in very diverse and challenging circumstances” (p. 67).

For the subject of military history (Chapter 3), Escott relies heavily on specialists’ wisdoms for featuring recent researches on soldiers’ life on Union and Confederate sides, the politics of high military command, the military-local government relations, localism within the Confederacy, Sherman’s psychological warfare, and social impact of military actions. For new directions, Escott points to the military experience of African Americans and Native Americans, military occupation, public reactions to toward the civilian control of the military, social treatment to soldiers (especially black soldiers), and postwar experience of Civil War veterans, in particular, those of the 45,000 amputees. While the powerful Civil War had changed the character of the American society, how people in every American community coped with “a highly militarized world” for four years and beyond calls for new and extensive investigations (p. 87).

Escott’s survey of the scholarship with environmental approaches is the most exciting and refreshing part to read. The subfield does not exist in traditional Civil War studies. It has now brought a new dimension to the field as historians produce highly specialized studies on the war and environmental damage, wartime diseases, pollution of water and other resources, the impact of civilian and military deaths, animals, as well as migration of various people during the wartime. Escott suggests that historians may expand the subfield to study the life of refugees, mobility of war veterans, and women’s adjustments to their wounded husbands and family members. The environmental approaches, Escott writes, “demonstrate the manifold ways in which the environment shaped the Civil War while warfare was affecting the environment” (p. 122).

Although Escott confines his historiographic review to the Civil War era, his coverage of the war’s “consequences and continuities” (Chapter 7) touches on issues concerning Reconstruction although not exhaustively. For this subject, Escott surveys new works on the impact of emancipation, southern whites’ reactions to Radical Reconstruction, political divides among

southern whites, the role of the West, Native Americans in the postwar time, and contested constructions of postwar national identities at different levels. He cautions historians not to view the Civil War merely as a North-vs-South conflict but as “a multi-front struggle among multiple sovereignties across the continent” (p. 130). While the roots of “conservative thought,” as manifested by Democrats’ understanding of the Constitution, white South’s violent resistance to the Radical Reconstruction and the Supreme Court’s rulings over the new constitutional amendments, is an important topic to study, Escott regards the inquiry into the long-term impact of the Civil War on local communities across the nation represents a “very promising way to bridge from the war years to postwar life” (p. 139).

Equally inspiring and stimulating is Chapter 5 addressing “New Techniques, New Opportunities.” In this chapter, Escott reviews digital resources in Civil War studies and discusses how digitization of information has begun to shape the research, teaching and presentation of the field’s scholarship. The prospect of creating a database that makes every newspaper advertisement for runaway slaves in the prewar South searchable signals astonishing new possibilities for future historians. Escott’s list of “desirable practices” in this regard includes greater cooperation and sharing among historians, standardization of key databases and tools, a registry of digital humanities projects, and a repository for digitized documents, databases, and projects.

Escott’s reviews are quite comprehensive, his commentaries are judicious, and his suggested directions for new research are thought-provoking. For every graduate student entering the field of Civil War history, this book should be an indispensable reference. No work is perfect, however. In his chapter on military history, Escott, by a passing mention, points out a direction of comparing guerrilla warfare in different national settings, but he does not go further. The internationalization of the American Civil War may well be a new direction for research to be considered by Escott. A panel at the 2019 annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians was devoted to how the Civil War affected other nations and their scholarship on US history (For the papers and discussion of the panel, see June 2020 Issue of *Civil War History*). Since we live in a global age, the question of the Civil War’s global ramifications may need to be explored, not only by U.S. historians but also by historians elsewhere.

Wang Xi teaches 19th-century U.S. history at Peking University, China and Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA. One of his ongoing research projects is tentatively titled “Black America and Red China: The Extended Problem of Color Line across the Pacific.”