

Household War: How Americans Lived and Fought the Civil War

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Review

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Frank, Lisa Tendrich and LeeAnn Whites, editors, *Household War: How Americans Lived and Fought the Civil War*. University of Georgia Press, 2020. PAPERBACK. \$32.95 ISBN 9780820386341 PP. 306.

This superb collection of essays builds on the central observation that the Civil War was “a household war.” Households, Lisa Tendrich Frank and LeeAnn Whites explain, were both a “physical place and an ideological construct” that became “the guiding principle behind many of the war’s causes as well as the impetus for wartime strategies.” In sum, the Civil War was “a conflict rooted in, fought by, and waged against households.” (3) The fourteen essays that follow are diverse in their overall focus and methodology, but none loses track of these themes. In a wonderful short Afterword, Stephen Berry contemplates the evolving meaning of “households,” concluding that this understanding of the war as a true household war is to “escape, finally, the homefront/battlefront binary.” (289)

This collection marks an important milestone in the field of Civil War Era studies. Historians (and especially graduate students) love a good historiographic essay, but I am not sure that anyone has ever attempted a historiographic review of essay collections on the Civil War Era. Such collections are particularly numerous, perhaps because wise publishers have recognized a multi-tiered audience. A review essay on Civil War collections would likely begin with the impressive list of essay collections written by famed military and political historians of the era.¹ Other multi-author collections aimed at the broad Civil War audience have concentrated on particular battles or military campaigns.

That imagined historiographic essay would likely mark the 1990, Maris Vinovskis-edited *Toward a Social History of the American Civil War* as a turning point. Vinovskis’s volume reprinted his 1989 JAH essay, “Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War?” and combined it

¹ Space and memory limitations do not allow for a complete list, but I am thinking of collections of essays by scholars such as David Potter, David Donald, and Kenneth Stampp. There have also been a considerable number of festschrift volumes dedicated to great (usually white male) Civil War scholars.

with six essays by young social historians.² Two years later Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber edited a remarkable volume called *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*.³ This collection included 18 essays exploring the war's diverse gender aspects. Over half of the contributors were quite new to the profession. Nearly three decades later *Divided Houses* stands as an important milestone in Civil War Era scholarship, and its contributors continue to shape the field. LeeAnn Whites, a co-editor of this volume, was one of those authors, as were Victoria Bynum and Joan Cashin, whose work also appears in *Household War*.

The collection proceeds in four sections, each of which maintains its own internal consistency. The three essays in Part 1 reconsider the household lives of important public figures, with particular attention to how their antebellum lives shaped their wartime experiences. Brooks D. Simpson, who has written extensively on Ulysses S. Grant, offers a brisk overview of Grant's life, including the war and his postwar years. Grant endured a demanding and hypocritical father and, after he married Julia Dent, he was saddled with an irascible father-in-law. It was challenging enough navigating these two difficult men and their households, but when he was serving in uniform Grant did his best to have Julia and his family with him, protecting family if not quite enjoying a household. It was not until 1868, when he was elected president, that Ulysses and Julia began a full eight years of living together in the same household.

Joseph Beilein, Jr., an historian of guerrilla warfare, considers Robert E. Lee's life, including the importance of his father, Light-Horse Harry Lee. Like Grant, Lee the soldier lived between two households, one defined by the army and the other by his family. Although Lee's father died when he was eleven, Beilein argues that stories of the Revolutionary patriot and sometimes partisan combatant shaped Robert's world view, leading him—for instance—to reject talk of the Confederacy turning to guerrilla warfare in 1865. Joan Cashin, who has most recently examined material culture during the Civil War, offers an innovative rethinking of Mary Todd Lincoln. Once again, Cashin explores the household experiences of her subject throughout her life, before turning to how the Kentucky-born first lady adapted to living in the White House.

² Maris Vinovskis, editor, *Toward a Social History of the American Civil War: Exploratory Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Vinovskis, "Have Social Historians Lost the American Civil War: Some Preliminary Demographic Findings," *Journal of American History* (76 (June 1989): 34-58.

³ Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

Despite Mary's substantial household budget and staff, Cashin argues that the Lincolns' antebellum Springfield home really surpassed the White House in "cleanliness, privacy, and comfort," (24).

The three essays in Part 2 take very different approaches to the notion of households in the midst of war. Drawing on his recent work on wartime dreaming, Jonathan W. White examines what Civil War soldiers wrote about their dreams. Not surprisingly, this vibrant dream life from the military front included detailed thoughts about the households they left behind. Although there were nightmares and sleepless nights, White writes that "most soldiers reported happy, peaceful, and romantic dreams of home," (93). In the only essay set entirely in the northern states, Julia A. Mujic reports on a close reading of 350 letters written by Wisconsin women to four wartime governors. By mining this invaluable body of evidence, Mujic argues that in multiple ways women at home sought to expand the household to include the battlefield. They asked for tangible state support for local aid societies, assistance in travelling to the front, and aid in securing nursing positions. The letters offer a window into what Wisconsin women were doing, while also underscoring their shared assumption that the state government should assist them. Finally, editor LeeAnn Whites uses letters between soldiers and family members back home to demonstrate that families provided a coherent "household supply line," once again tying the household to the battlefield. Whites explores family correspondence from a handful of households in both the North and South. Families sent clothing, food, and fond letters, hoping to fill gaps in the soldiers' lives. Whites's close inspection of her sample indicates how these household supply lines varied. Soldiers stationed closer to home received more packages. Generally speaking, Confederate families had less to send, and their loved ones were further from home, producing another northern advantage. Whites also introduces Wash, an enslaved Black man from North Carolina, who travelled back and forth to see George Willis at the front, providing a human form of this supply line. Meanwhile, George occasionally included notes from Wash to his enslaved wife, reminding the reader that there were diverse households within the Confederacy.

Part 3 includes four fine essays analyzing how households became "the site of war." Editor Lisa Tendrich Frank, who has written extensively on how Sherman's March targeted southern households, turns to those themes to underscore how Sherman's actions—and especially his famed evacuation of Atlanta—were all part of calculated military operations.

Rather than perceiving Sherman as turning towards civilians with gracious benevolence, Frank explains that the general—perhaps based on his prior experiences with guerrilla units—understood that female-headed households could, and did, support the enemy. Here, again, we should understand households as central to supply lines. Margaret Storey flips the conversation by considering those northern women who became part of the Union’s occupation of southern cities and towns. Storey explains that the spouses and families of Union officers commonly created their own households in places like Vicksburg, Memphis, and Corinth. Some rented space from local Unionists, others occupied homes abandoned by secessionists. Wherever they ventured, these transplanted northern households established cultural beachheads, intent on changing the worlds they entered.

Andrew K. Frank, an historian of Native American history, expands our traditional understanding of the Civil War considerably by presenting a close analysis of a body of Creek and Seminole families who became refugees in late 1861. Frank’s essay is thick with insights, many of which turned on how gender identities and political assumptions shaped Creek and Seminole households and lives. In these female-centered and matrilineal cultures, both treaties and military behavior stressed protecting the households. Even when men agreed to enlist, they still sought to remain close enough to protect their families. Lorien Foote turns to another neglected page in the history of the conflict, examining the wartime experiences of some 2,800 Union prisoners of war who escaped from Confederate prisons late in the war. Foote uses the experiences of these escapees as a window into the fundamental diversity of Confederate households in the last year of the war. As these men found their way across the Carolinas and to the North, they encountered Unionists households, deserter households, and enslaved households. In this telling, Foote conveys the true racial and political diversity of Confederate households, often disrupted by the war.

The final three essays in Part 4 once again expand our notions of the Civil War Era by focusing on the postwar years. Victoria Bynum tells us about “disordered households” in Orange County, North Carolina, viewed largely through local court records. In this complex biracial world, under the political control of Governor William Holden, postwar African Americans could legally marry, but beyond that their political rights and fates remained fraught. The state’s extensive apprenticeship system seemed more interested in black and multiracial children as laborers as opposed to as parts of loving households. Meanwhile, despite Holden’s limited

efforts, the KKK threatened both black and mixed households, and the Freedman's Bureau could do little to protect abused women. Bynum's account is a valuable portrayal of the complex legal and racial world that the war left behind. Like Foote, Bynum illuminates the importance of emancipation in changing southern households and politics.

The war also left behind many mourners. In another analysis of the postwar Confederacy, Angela Esco Elder considers the experiences of white widows and mothers who lost menfolk to the war. Using extensive materials from her prize-winning dissertation, Elder describes a world where huge numbers of women turned to mourning during the war, while also often navigating new households where widows and mothers lived together wearing black. While Elder looks at the postwar world of white Confederate women, Brian Craig Miller examines those white southern men who survived the war, but often with their bodies, their minds, and their households not entirely intact. Miller offers a sophisticated analysis of postwar masculinity, focusing on white men who had every reason to feel their own manhood had been damaged. In many cases, Miller finds that the United Confederate Veterans stepped in, filling important voids in these broken lives while holding reunions and other gatherings for decades after Appomattox.

Considered as individual essays, the fourteen pieces in *Household War* are excellent, providing models of research and analysis, generally buttressed by excellent documentation. Taken together, the essays and the Introduction and Afterword make important strides in the larger project to rethink the dimensions of the Civil War—both chronologically and geographically. Households really did contribute to how the war was fought, and that conflict often occurred in and around those households. Collectively they demonstrate that wartime households reflected antebellum sensibilities, but the war left those households changed for a host of reasons.

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