

## Civil-War-Era Historians' New Subjects and Novel Approaches

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## Editorial

**Hobson, Jeffery Hardin**

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Recent history repeats itself as, yet again, the reviews in this, the first issue of the *Civil War Book Review*'s twenty-fifth volume, reveal the array of subjects historians of the Civil War era cover. Even when the authors assessed herein cover familiar ground, they use novel approaches that offer fresh insight on well-known topics.

Evan C. Rothera's *Civil Wars and Reconstructions in the Americas: The United States, Mexico, and Argentina, 1860 – 1880* is a recent example *par excellence* of the international turn in Civil War studies according to reviewer Andre M. Fleche. Rothera looks at people, goods, and concepts that crossed borders between the U.S., Mexico, and Argentina in the tumultuous 1860s, '70s, and '80s, a span of time in which “all three fought destructive civil wars”—a phenomenon, Rothera insists contemporaries appreciated in ways historians have not. Fleche writes that Rothera's work “will take its place as one of the most thorough and sustained analyses yet written of the mid-nineteenth century relations between the U.S. and Latin America.”

Hans Rasmussen similarly takes the international turn in this issue's *Civil War Treasures* essay. Rasmussen uses manuscripts and ephemera housed in L.S.U. Library's special collections to investigate how historical phenomena beyond America's borders penetrated Civil-War-era American society and politics. Specifically, Rasmussen examines artifacts pertaining to the 1851-52 U.S. tour of Hungarian revolutionary, Louis Kossuth to reveal contours of an American anti-Russian sentiment and pro-democratic impulse that lingers in Americans' current love affair with Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky. Importantly, Rasmussen shows that the ever-present issue of slavery complicated the Hungarian revolutionary's visit to the U.S.—a topic that did not taint Zelensky's recent American visit.

*The Long Civil War: New Explorations of America's Enduring Conflict*, a collection of essays edited by John David Smith and Raymond Arsenault, takes, as its title suggests, a *longue durée* approach to the Civil War to help us understand its lasting effects. The essays cover a broad swath of temporal ground and a range of topics—from the 1830s to the Eisenhower

administration and from the colonization movement to Walt Disney productions. Reviewer Thomas F. Curran writes that the book's breadth "validates the expansive spectrum of scholarship being produced that employs a broader chronological understanding of the war."

Lauren N. Haumesser focuses her research on a much narrower timeframe in *The Democratic Collapse: How Gender Politics Broke a Party and a Nation, 1856 – 1861*. In each of the book's five chapters, "Haumesser uses lively anecdotes and carefully curated evidence to deepen her readers' understanding of the political tumult that led to sectional collapse, including the election of 1856, debates about 'domestic relations' in territorial Utah and Kansas, the responses to John Brown's raid, the 1860 presidential campaign, and, finally, the Secession Winter that followed," writes reviewer Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz.

Two books, Ernest E. Dollar's *Hearts Torn Asunder: Trauma in the Civil War's Final Campaign in North Carolina* and the reissue of Paul A. Cimabala's and Randall M. Miller's *The Northern Home Front During the Civil War*, examine how the Civil War affected civilian life. Dollar's *Hearts Torn Asunder* reveals civilians suffered from disease and depredation resultant from both belligerents' presence in their midst, despite commanders' attempts to prevent plunder and violence. Dollar does not ignore the trauma soldiers suffered, and in fact claims much of the plundering was likely a consequence of soldiers' alcoholism and opiate addiction, both themselves consequences of their Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In short, "Dollar's research will quickly disabuse readers tempted to view the Civil War as a romantic or heroic crusade," writes reviewer Jonathan M. Atkins.

Cimabala and Miller "are masters of their topic and offer a lively account of life in the North during the Civil War," writes reviewer Antoinette G. van Zelm. This "engagingly written" book is "chock full of American voices" that reveal "the diversity and dissension that characterized the Northern populace," van Zelm continues. In the end, the book demonstrates that, though northerners were overwhelmingly spared the violence attendant to the war, "the authors emphasize the tumultuous nature of northern wartime society," Van Zelm writes. The reissue of the authors' important text is augmented by a new preface and a bibliographic essay, the latter of which, van Zelm writes, "provides numerous resources for further exploration."

William A. Link and Allie Stuart Povall both composed biographies that do more than trace their subjects' lives and highlight important milestones. Reviewer Howell K. Keiser, Jr., writes that the subject of Link's *The Last Fire-Eater: Roger A. Pryor and the Search for*

*Southern Identity* underwent “remarkable—and at times contradictory—transformations” that “mirrored the puzzling journey of the South before, during, and after the Civil War.” In the process, Link engages scholarship on honor, masculinity, secession, trauma, and reconciliation, which Keiser believes “opens the door for additional individual studies of southern identity before, during, and after the war.”

Though commander biographies have long been a mainstay of Civil War history, Povall’s *Union Warriors at Sunset: The Lives of Twenty Commanders after the War* reorients our focus from commanders’ wartime exploits to “what happened to famous commanders in blue *after* the guns fell silent,” writes reviewer Daniel E. Cone. Povall’s subjects, Cone writes, “faced their own peculiar challenges, such as getting by on smaller paychecks, dealing with obtrusive bureaucracies, and worrying about retirements, reputations, and legacies.” *Union Warriors at Sunset* is “an easy, casual read” that “serves well for those seeking to know more about the postbellum lives of Civil War generals, without having to flip to the back parts of an assortment of two-, three-, or four-hundred-page biographical tomes,” Cone concludes.

In this issue’s *Civil War Obscura*, our steadfast contributor Meg Groeling writes about the postwar literary work of Civil War veteran John William De Forest. Groeling specifically focuses on his novel *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*. Groeling writes that De Forest’s work is significant because it was one of the first widely read novels to realistically depict war—“with blood, gore, illness, and heartbreak.” Groeling believes the novel will appeal to Civil War enthusiasts not only because of its gritty portrayal of the Civil War but also because of its many Easter eggs. “Names of places, people, and battles are changed to further fictionalize the story, but figuring out where, who, and what is easy and much fun,” Groeling writes. “Civil War geeks,” like us “will have a wonderful time trying to outdo each other in expertise.”

The postwar experiences of lesser known, yet historically significant, veterans are the subject of Allison M. Johnson’s *The Left-Armed Corps: Writings by Amputee Civil War Veterans*. Reviewer Kenneth W. Noe writes that Johnson’s book “is meticulously and thoroughly edited.” Still, Johnson presents “a lightly edited sample of” the Left-Armed Corps’ submissions to William Oland Bourn’s left-handed penmanship contests. The entries, Noe notes, cover an array of topics, including “enlistment, motivations, camp life, battle, politics, patriotism, how they lost their arms, and ultimately how the war transformed them and ideas about masculinity.” Johnson’s *The Left-Armed Corps*, Noe concludes, is “an impressive example of historical editing

and a worthy monument to soldiers who suffered for their country even long after they left the battlefield.”

Black veterans’ postwar battle for their citizenship rights, bounties, and pensions are the focus of Dale Kretz’s *Administering Freedom: The State of Emancipation after the Freedman’s Bureau*. *Administering Freedom* exposes how USCT veterans, their widows and heirs, and the post-slave South’s general Black population engaged with the federal government to secure just compensation for their wartime efforts, injuries, injustices, and their enslavement. Kretz shows that, in the process, freedpeople forced the federal welfare and administrative state’s expansion. Reviewer Robert Colby writes that Kretz’s work “is deeply researched, eminently readable, and offers a novel perspective on Black encounters with the American administrative state.” Colby has no doubt the book “will prove thought-provoking for all readers, including even the most immersed students of the Civil War era.”

In this issue’s author interview, I speak with Kretz about his research. We take a deep dive into how he came upon the subject and what his research reveals about the diversity of Black Americans’ collective activism in the Civil War era and the restrictive template the Freedmen’s Bureau, the Freedmen’s Branch, and the Pension Bureau drew for future welfare programs.

Kretz’s subjects endured multiple indignities from the federal government, but also endured white southerners’ efforts to segregate the postwar South, which is the focus of Carl V. Harris’s and W. Elliot Brownlee’s *Segregation in the New South: Birmingham, Alabama, 1871 – 1901*. Reviewer Williamjames Hull Hoffer writes that while Brownlee completed the book, the manuscript was Harris’s brainchild and late-life pet project. Harris, with Brownlee’s help, exposes an earlier effort to establish a segregated society than that which C. Vann Woodward revealed in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. This segregation project was earliest adopted in southern cities, including Birmingham as segregationists succeeded in erecting barriers between Black and white populations “almost immediately after emancipation,” Hoffer writes. This discovery makes *Segregating the New South* “an important contribution to the history of the New South, Black America, and the origins of Jim Crow,” Hoffer concludes.

As always, we at the *Civil War Book Review* are grateful to our contributors and you, our faithful readers.

Happy reading,

Jeffery Hardin Hobson, Editor