

## New Framing for Familiar Topics

Jeffery Hardin Hobson  
jhobso8@lsu.edu

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Hobson, Jeffery Hardin (2023) "New Framing for Familiar Topics," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 .  
DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.25.2.01  
Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol25/iss2/1>

## Editorial

Hobson, Jeffery Hardin

Spring 2023

Book reviews and feature essays in this issue of the *Civil War Book Review* touch on familiar topics—emancipation, Lincoln’s relationship to African Americans, the Civil War in an international context, commander biographies, Civil War unit histories, gender, southern culture, and Civil War era literature. However, the essays and books featured herein approach these familiar topics from new angles and, as a result, provide fresh insight into otherwise standard subjects.

Multiple books under review in this issue examine Black Americans’ transition from slavery to freedom in the long nineteenth century. Reviewer Matthew J. Clavin writes that abolitionist William Still has been overshadowed by prominent antislavery activists like “Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Tubman” and others. However, Andrew K Diemer’s *Vigilance: The Life of William Still, Father of the Underground Railroad* (Alfred A. Knopf) is a “well-written and deeply researched biography” that will ensconce Still among the most important abolitionists. The book itself, Clavin writes, will similarly earn “a place on the shelf of new and important works on abolitionists, abolitionism, and the Underground Railroad.”

Just as Diemer reveals the importance of one man to the Underground Railroad, Alicestyne Turley’s *The Gospel of Freedom: Black Evangelicals and the Underground Railroad* (University Press of Kentucky) reveals how one state, Kentucky, was an integral if overlooked part of African Americans’ quest for emancipation in the long-nineteenth century. Reviewer Richard Newman believes Turley’s most important contribution is her contention that Black religious leaders made “Kentucky a viable pass-through locale for generations of African American freedom seekers,” which makes the state a peer of other “major crossroads of the Underground Railroad,” like “Pennsylvania, New York, Indiana, and Ohio.” Newman writes that Turley’s examination of the religious activists, especially Black leaders, who developed “networks of slave escape” is “both informative and ramifying.”

Carole Emberton’s *To Walk About in Freedom: The Long Emancipation of Priscilla Joyner* (W. W. Norton) “poignantly and effectively conveys the essence of emancipation as lived by one

biracial woman” writes reviewer Diane Miller Sommerville. Joyner’s biracialism complicated her life and her transition to freedom. Initially “raised by a white, slaveholding mother figure who refused to divulge the identity of [her] father,” after the war, Priscilla was sent to live in “Freedom Hill, North Carolina, an enclave of newly freed men and women,” where she found, “for the first time, the loving bonds of kinship and belonging,” Sommerville explains. Emebrton uses Priscilla’s story (in conjunction with other sources to fill gaps) to show that “emancipation was not a single moment but rather a process, and a process that was very individual,” Sommerville writes.

Black Americans’ attitudes toward the Great Emancipator are the focus of *Knowing Him by Heart: African Americans on Abraham Lincoln* (University of Illinois Press), edited by Fred Lee Hord and Matthew D. Norman. The essays show that African Americans’ attitudes toward Lincoln “plumb deeper than his reputation as the Great Emancipator,” writes reviewer Lucas E. Morel. Indeed, African Americans’ attitudes toward Lincoln from his presidency to the recent past evince a “persistent ambivalence,” write Hord and Norman in their introduction. Morel believes that “the value of a book about Black American opinions of Lincoln resides not only in the neglected history it tells, but also the possibility it can rejuvenate a discussion of what an excluded people saw worth saving in the Great Emancipator and the nation he thought worthy of the saving.”

Stephen J. Brady’s *Chained to History: Slavery and U.S. Foreign Relations to 1865* (Cornell University Press) “makes a signal contribution to nineteenth-century history: producing a comprehensive, well-written, and authoritative one-volume account of the impact of Black slavery on early U.S. statecraft,” writes reviewer Robert Bonner. Bonner believes that “the book’s breadth and the clarity of its interpretations and exposition make it a natural choice for teaching undergraduate or graduate students,” though he is confident there is plenty in the volume “that will be of use to fellow specialists who can rely on Brady’s primary research into relatively obscure aspects” of the relationship between U.S. foreign policy and slavery.

Essayist Hans Rasmussen examines the Civil War’s international aspects in this issue’s “Civil War Treasures” essay. Specifically, Rasmussen uses several manuscripts housed in LSU’s Hill Memorial Library’s special collections to see how Americans, civilians and military personnel alike, reacted to France’s intervention in Mexico and the installment of Maximilian I as the country’s head of state. Importantly, Rasmussen’s sources reveal some Confederate leaders’ and advisors’ desires to convince Mexico’s newfound leadership to recognizing its independence and persuade France to do the same.

Ulysses S. Grant's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday reignited historians' interest in his life which led to a slew of new biographies on the commanding-general-turned president. Richard G. Mannion reviews two such books, *Grant at 200: Reconsidering the Life and Legacy of Ulysses S. Grant* (Savas Beatie), edited by Chris Mackowski and Frank J. Scaturro, and Jack Hearst's *America's Hardscrabble General: Ulysses S. Grant, from Farm Boy to Shiloh* (Southern Illinois University Press). Both books go far to rescue Grant's reputation which was, until recently, Mannion explains, that of a "drunkard, a butcher, an accident of history consistently regarded as one of the two worst American presidents."

Mackowski's and Scaturro's *Grant at 200*, "is a joint collaboration between the Ulysses S. Grant Association and the Grant Monument Association. It is a compelling collection of essays designed to effect and promote the efficacy of Grant's 'reputational reclamation,' as well as to examine some lesser known aspects of Grant's life," writes Mannion. This collection of essays "will appeal to both serious students of Grant as well as the most casual of Grant enthusiasts," Mannion concludes.

In *America's Hardscrabble General*, Hearst traces Grant's life from his "lower-middle-class childhood" to his assumption of the U.S. Army's command. Hearst finds that the many hardships Grant faced in his youth were far from obstacles. Rather, he turned them into learning opportunities that helped him "become the greatest and most successful battle commander in American military history," writes Mannion.

Troops under Grant's subordinate, William T. Sherman, take center stage in Eric Michael Burke's *Soldiers from Experience: The Forging of Sherman's Fifteenth Army Corps, 1862 – 1863* (Louisiana State University Press). Reviewer Michael A. Boden writes that "unit histories are common" in Civil War literature, and they tend to focus on "how particular units fought." However, Burke's "fascinating study" diverges from this trend to focus on the "whys" of the unit's actions. Burke "meticulously examines each successive campaign" of the corps to show that, from its organization to 1863, the Fifteenth Army Corps "forged a very particular 'tactical culture' that distinguished it from other units ... throughout the entire Federal Army," writes Boden. Boden concludes that "Burke should be commended for this detailed study, which sets a new model for the investigation of unit histories."

Megan L. Bever's *At War with King Alcohol: Debating Drinking and Masculinity in the Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press) examines the relationship between soldiers and

officers, and alcohol. More specifically, Bever situates the conversation within concepts of masculinity in the Civil War era, part of a larger trend of investigating the intersection of temperance and other “trendier topics,” writes reviewer Brendan J. J. Payne. In what Payne believes is a “persuasively argued, clearly written, and just the right size” volume, Bever explores topics including Americans’ “medicinal justification” for consumption, the disparate attitudes and regulations on consumption within the two armies, over-indulgence and troop readiness, soldiers’ “democratic view of privilege from rank” and their consumption, and concepts about “duty, disloyalty, and drinking.” In the end, Payne believes *At War with King Alcohol* is fit “for scholars, graduate students, and all readers interested in the connection between ideas of masculinity and alcohol in the Civil War.”

Though not exclusively focused on the Civil War era, Charles Reagan Wilson’s *The Southern Way of Life: Meanings of Culture & Civilization in the American South* (University of North Carolina Press) examines the region from the Civil War era to the recent past. Reviewer William A. Link believes the volume is a fitting capstone of Wilson’s “distinguished career as a historian of southern culture.” Wilson uses “critical regionalist theory” to show that the South is and has been “a highly diverse place.” Despite its diversity, Wilson shows that “factors of race and religion” have and continue to “dominate” southern culture and society. Though readers will “find much familiar” in *Southern Way of Life*, Link believes, the book “is, simply put, a major achievement” that will appeal to general readers and specialists.

Recent scholarship on Walt Whitman, including multiple books recently reviewed in this journal, have focused on his writings as well as his relationship to the American state and democracy. Dedicated essayist Meg Groeling asks how Whitman’s contemporaries received his 1855 volume, *Leaves of Grass*. Groeling explains that many found Whitman’s “sexual frankness ... offensive.” One such figure was Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, who fired Whitman from his federal government job because he “refused to employ a man who wrote such disreputable books.” Groeling asks if Whitman’s “sexual frankness” in *Leaves of Grass* might make it a target for modern-day reactionary censors. Just in case, Groeling “suggests readers get a copy of *Leaves of Grass* before they are all gone!”

Lastly, this is my final issue as editor of the *Civil War Book Review*, which occasions a round of thanks. I would not be here had LSU’s Director of Scholarly Publishing, Sigrid Kelsey, not taken a chance on me. I am thankful she saw me fit to take on this job. Her decision to place

me at the journal's helm was likely the result of letters of recommendation written by my mentors, Gaines M. Foster and Aaron Sheehan-Dean, and for their endorsements, I am grateful. These issues would have been impossible to publish without the hard work of my graduate assistants, Jazzlynn Boyd, Kaylin Cooper, and Emma Carlo. Previous editors have guided me through my editorship, most especially Luke Hargroder and Thomas Barber; I am thankful for their advice and counsel. Of course, these issues are the result of our reviewers' work. I am grateful they have taken time from their beyond-busy schedules to contribute to our journal. It has been a pleasure and honor to steward this publication and to grow its readership and footprint. I am eager to see my successor, K. Howell Keiser Jr., continue this trend.

Happy reading and many thanks,  
Jeffery Hardin Hobson, Editor