

Perspectives on the Civil War Era

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Perspectives on the Civil War Era

Editorial

Keiser, K. Howell, Jr.

The book reviews and feature essay in this fall 2023 issue of the *Civil War Book Review* highlight the Civil War Era from the perspectives of various individuals and groups – black sailors and surgeons, women, guerillas, cavalry soldiers, Cherokee warriors, and veterans. The sectional crisis and the war to come shaped the lives of countless individuals, and no one person experienced these years from the same perspective. Emphasizing these various perspectives brings to the surface the complex nature of human perception, and it reminds us that no event or experience produces the same interpretation.

Two books reviewed in this issue explore the experience of Black Americans during the Civil War. Jill Newmark's *Without Concealment, Without Compromise: The Courageous Lives of Black Civil War Surgeons* (SIL Press, 2023) leaves “no stone unturned,” writes reviewer Margaret Humphreys. In sketching the lives of fourteen black surgeons, Newmark documents the courageous life of these men who battled racism in service of the needs of US Colored Troops (UCSTs). A handful of these surgeons had received training before the war at various institutions, including the University of Toronto, Howard University and Harvard; others achieved literacy, schooling, and medical proficiency during the war years. Their service and uniforms became symbols of respect, literacy, and accomplishment, providing these surgeons with a sense of pride in a racist and racially stratified society. Although the post-war years brought continued racial struggle, the service and experience of black surgeons illustrated “one visible manifestation of how fast mores were changing.” James H. Bruns's *Black Sailors in the*

Civil War: A History of Fugitives, Freeman and Freedmen Aboard Union Vessels (McFarland, 2023) likewise highlights the obscurity of black sailors during the Civil War. Serving on the seas and rivers, these sailors had experiences that differed from USCTs. Although Bruns's argument, as Christopher Rein points out, becomes muddled at times, his focus on black sailors and their personal struggles in "monotonous blockade duty" brings attention to a worthy topic.

While Humphreys and Bruns focus on the life of marginalized black men during the war, Michael D. Pierson's *The Wild Woman of Cincinnati: Gender and Politics on the Eve of the Civil War* (LSU Press, 2023) explores the "Wild Woman" shows in Cincinnati, Ohio in an effort to illuminate political and sectional difference in antebellum America. Although the creators of the show clearly constructed a fictitious woman for successful marketing, the character nevertheless offers a window into the gender and political norms of the time. According to the reviewer, Emily Muhich, "the daring tale of tracking, evasion, and capture played into white racial anxiety and the urban male nostalgia for the old version of masculinity that involved self-reliant men in the wild with full sexual access to women." Democratic papers, for instance, emphasized the ways the Woman must have been complicit in the hoax. The Democratic media mouthpieces ultimately viewed her as a sexual object in need of male subjugation and thereby "devoid of political prowess." On the other hand, Republicans viewed the woman as a person victimized by a tyrannical male. The different interpretations emanating from political parties appears to mirror the sectional difference between free labor and slaveholder mastery. In underscoring these differences Pierson presents a compelling story about gender politics in the partisan society of antebellum America.

Geography and personal recollections of one's duty also shaped ones understanding of the Civil War. Zach C. Waters's *A Wilderness of Destruction: Confederate Guerrillas of East*

and South Florida, 1862–1865 (Mercer University Press, 2023) brings this realization to the forefront. Waters’s account of guerrilla warfare in Florida, according to reviewer Ralph Mann, “is based on a huge amount of reading and research in the available secondary literature, as well as in the records of Florida’s Civil War government and federal records of the *War of the Rebellion* (OR) and *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (ORN).” He leaves no battle, or event that might be classified as a guerrilla action, unexamined. Florida – largely abandoned by the Confederate government early on in the war – was left to its own devices, and guerrilla partisans proved vital for its defense. As the war progressed, the actions of guerrillas divulged into murder, robbery, and lynching. Waters, Mann acknowledges, is well-aware of the biased nature of the memoirs he cites. Guerrillas remembered their violent actions in a white-washed character, often labeling them as acts of “self-defense” and “self-glorification” for the lost cause. His careful analysis of guerrilla actions and their own self-perceptions of their war experience offers a unique insight into the Civil War in Florida and, as Mann explains, “it is hard to imagine that anyone else will try to duplicate Waters’s exhaustive coverage of Florida’s war.”

Despite the complex and delicate nature of wartime memoirs, there is no shortage of collections on Civil War reminiscences and letters. *Through Blood and Fire: The Civil War Letters of Major Charles J. Mills, 1862–1865*, edited by J. Gregory Acken (Kent State University Press, 2023) adds to this growing list of publications. Although initially privately published, Mr. Acken adds to the story with “detailed notes, introductions, and explanations.” According to reviewer David Eicher, Acken’s additions presents readers with “an enlightening record of a young life extinguished far too soon.” Charles Mills’s personal recollections from his military service at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Petersburg is a compelling story. Longing for an officer’s

commission at the outbreak of war but unable to attain it, Mill enlisted as a private and served with honor throughout the war, ultimately receiving his long sought after commission, though at a dire cost. While Eicher notes that his “story and recollections could have been much fuller, stretching years past the record that he did leave,” this hardly detracts from the overall work. This is a moving account of martial manhood in antebellum America, and it will prove a fruitful read for readers interested in the Eastern theater.

The martial manhood and daring exploits of cavalry operations continue to fascinate readers of the Civil War era as well. Daniel Murphey’s *Horse Soldiers at Gettysburg: The Cavalryman’s View of the Civil War’s Pivotal Campaign* (Stackpole, 2023), according to reviewer Allen C. Guelzo, offers an insightful and “perceptive overview of the cavalry’s role in the broad sweep of the Gettysburg campaign.” Murphey’s breakdown and analysis of cavalry operations is detailed, presenting readers with thorough calculations of horse populations and the subsistence needs of a horse campaign. Rather than getting bogged down with the “nagging” questions of J.E.B. Stuart’s ride to nowhere during the Gettysburg Campaign, Guelzo notes that Murphey charts a different path. Instead, Guelzo writes, Murphey “is more generous in his interpretation of Stuart than most. He is inclined to credit both the potential benefits of the ride and Lee’s awareness of the risks it involved.” Beyond the Stuart controversy, this book gives readers a useful introduction to the cavalry campaign at Gettysburg. For readers interested in Corbin’s Charge at Westminster, Maryland or the several cavalry skirmishes during General Robert E. Lee’s retreat from Gettysburg, they will find much of use here.

Although cavalry operations have long fascinated scholars and a general audience interested in the U.S. Civil War, the role of Native Americans in the war has only just recently garnered greater interest. W. Dale Weeks’s *Cherokee Civil Warrior: Chief John Ross and the*

Struggle for Tribal Sovereignty (University of Oklahoma Press, 2023) is an example of this trend. Weeks contends that this is not “the story of the Civil War in Indian Territory. Rather, it tells the story of the Cherokee Nation and its efforts to survive the Civil War Era.” (5) Centering his narrative on the Cherokee nation itself, he underscores the “human toll” the war took. The personal struggles of John Ross, the question of treaty obligations and tribal sovereignty, and postwar policy decisions all emphasize the complex middle ground occupied by the Cherokee people. Weeks’s focus on postwar policy will be particularly interesting to readers. Lincoln seemed positioned by the end of the war to recognize the constitutionality of the treaties with the Cherokee people. However, the assassination of Lincoln removed their strongest advocate. This leaves readers, writes reviewer Joseph Genetin-Pilawa, with “some speculation as to what may have been, had Lincoln not been assassinated in 1865.” For those interested in Cherokee history and the Native American experience during the Civil War, *Cherokee Civil Warrior* is a necessary addition to the bookshelf.

While Weeks documents the Cherokee struggle for tribal sovereignty before, during, and after the war, Stephen A. Goldman’s *One More War to Fight: Union Veterans’ Battle for Equality Through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Lost Cause* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2023) documents how Union veterans of the “Left Armed Corps” struggled to solidify their moral legacy in the postwar years. According to reviewer Brian Matthew Jordan, these veterans “individually and collectively maintained their important interconnected roles as potent moral and political forces, particularly through the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR).” Approaching his study as a trained psychiatrist, Goldman probes the mind and actions of these men as they grappled with a changing political landscape in the post-war years. Reminding readers that the GAR opposed racial segregation and the Ku Klux Klan allows Goldman to add

to the sprawling historiographical literature which underscores how rank and file Northern soldiers often promoted more enlightened attitudes on slavery and race. Goldman's passion reverberates throughout, and his rich source load offers a compelling story, even if some of his answers prove less convincing.

In addition to the reviews, we kick off this issue with Hans Rasmussen's feature essay, "Knowing Which Way the Wind was Blowing during Reconstruction." Addressing the scholarship on environmental history of the Civil War, Rasmussen looks this past summer's record-breaking heat in Baton Rouge, Louisiana to not only bring attention to various works on this subject, including Kenneth Noe's monumental work on Civil War weather conditions, *The Howling Storm: Weather, Climate, and the American Civil War* (2020), but also to bring attention to LSU's libraries' holdings of records from the US Weather Bureau. While this collection offers little for the war years, it nevertheless has much to offer for "any historian contemplating the role of the weather on southern history during Reconstruction." As Rasmussen makes clear, the volatility of New Orleans during Reconstruction intersected with extreme weather events of the period. After all, it is important to note that "the events of Reconstruction played out within the context of an agrarian society where most people lived in rural areas, close to nature and susceptible to the fickle whims of weather and climate. A dry summer, a wet spring, a sudden flood, or an early killing frost may have put a locality's agricultural economy out of joint for a while and spun off other political or social reverberations." Rasmussen's insights present historians with a new, yet intriguing, puzzle for historians of Reconstruction to unravel.

It is a pleasure to bring this fall issue of the *Civil War Book Review* to our readers.

"Perspectives on the Civil War Era" hopes to encourage readers to recognize the complex nature

of perception and experience. Scholarship continues to add to our understanding of these pivotal years in U.S. history. And as scholars have noted, competing perceptions and interpretations about wartime and post-war experiences also continue to shape our understanding of the present. While no one Civil War experience was the same, they combine to present a fuller picture of this unique, triumphant, and troubling chapter in our nation's history.

Happy reading,

K. Howell Keiser, Jr., Editor