

Environmental History in Focus

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Environmental History in Focus

Editorial

Keiser, K. Howell, Jr.

The book reviews in this winter 2024 issue of the *Civil War Book Review* emphasize the role of the environment during the Civil War Era. While our two feature essays take us out of the realm of environmental history and into the world of politics, the primary focus of this winter issue is the role of nature in history. In recent years, historians have added to our knowledge of the environment's role in the past. Nowhere is this more clear than in the Civil War Era. As historian Stephen Berry explained, "Like the Columbian Exchange, the Civil War was a massive stir of the biotic soup, and in many ways that stir, more than the battles themselves, was the real story of the war."¹ Each of the scholarly works reviewed in this issue expound on Berry's point, reminding us that the environment was not merely a backdrop to historical events. It was an active participant, a force of imagination, and a vehicle and recipient of change.

We begin this issue with two feature essays by Frank J. Williams and Hans Rasmussen. Williams' "A Look at Lincoln" reviews Edward Achorn's *The Lincoln Miracle: Inside the Republican Convention that Changed History*. Awarded the 2023 Lincoln Forum Book Prize, Williams assesses Achorn's perspective on the "sophisticated tactics leading to his nomination at the Wigwam in Chicago over those fateful days." What emerges is an intricate portrait of Abraham Lincoln, a man who could have easily faded into obscurity in Springfield, Illinois. Careful attention to the heated political battles, diverse personalities, demographics, and

¹ Stephen Berry, "The Future of Civil War Era Studies," *Journal of the Civil War Era*, vol. 2, no. 1 (March 2012), 6.

contentious rivalries presents the reader with an accessible and enthralling narrative on the rise and legacy of American's greatest president.

Hans Rasmussen keeps us in the world of politics as he explores the heated nature of nineteenth-century American politics through political cartoons. The Civil War Cartoon Album at Louisiana State University's Special Collections contains a wealth of information regarding "northern political humor about the South during the early days of the war." Collected by an eleven-year-old schoolboy in Worcester, Massachusetts, the cartoon collection covers the secession of the southern states, as well as the early years of the conflict. While these cartoons, according to Rasmussen, lacked the detail and of political cartoons published in well-known newspapers, they nevertheless "managed to satisfy a demand for admittedly crude and blunt humor." Such a need emerged, Rasmussen maintains, because Americans found it useful to comically "interpret the looming conflict and prepare Americans emotionally for a war that turned out not to be as simple as their humorists and themselves imagined." The various political cartoons included in this essay truly bring the war years to life.

Our contributors, Rich Newman and Marissa Jenrich, introduce readers to environmental history and the role of nature in structuring society and culture in their reviews of David Silkenat's *Scars on the Land: An Environmental History of Slavery in the American South*, and Thomas D. Wilson's *Charleston and Savannah: The Rise, Fall, and Reinvention of Two Rival Cities*. According to Newman, Silkenat's study on slavery and the environment in the antebellum South "expertly examines the ecological transformation of southern landscapes between the colonial era and the Civil War." Divided into seven thematic chapters, *Scars on the Land* offers readers a compelling narrative of slavery's environmental and human impacts. Silkenat's detailed account of the peculiar institution sheds new light on the fact that "slavery more than

nature defined the South as a region” (2). It was a poison that left no aspect of the southern environment untouched. Ultimately, slaveholders’ views on bondage became an “essential part of the Southern landscape.”

While slavery mainly fostered a confined and exhausted southern environment, it is important to note that the South was not without expanding commercial cities. Slave-based agricultural and economic diversification existed simultaneously. Marissa Jenrich’s review of Thoams D. Wilson’s *Charleston and Savannah* assesses the ways “urban planning helped shape the politics, economics, and culture of Savannah and Charleston, respectively, as well as how these early foundations continue to influence the experiences of city residents and visitors in our contemporary moment.” While Charleston essentially emerged as a carefully planned city for the economic juggernaut of slave-based commercial agriculture, Savannah and the colony of Georgia as a whole initially attempted to chart an alternative path that outlawed slavery in favor of an egalitarian society for the “worthy poor.” However, as Charlestonians extended their influence into Savannah, the city began to mirror the slave society of Charleston. The urban environment – or second nature – was thus reshaped by the cultural values of a growing slave society. Although scholars of the Civil War Era and Reconstruction may find the book lacking in terms of an extended historiography, Jenrich still maintains that Wilson offers “a temporally and geographically ambitious work” that will excite those who are historically-minded urban planners and activists.

While Silkenat and Wilson focus on slavery and the creation of an urban second nature, Scott Hippensteel’s *Sand, Science, and the Civil War: Sedimentary Geology and Combat* emphasizes the role of the natural world in military engagements. According to reviewer Erin S. Mauldin, Hippensteel fills a “critical gap in several different literatures on America’s Civil War.”

Although not a historian, Hippensteel effectively illustrates how sedimentary geology impacted military operations. His training as a professor of earth sciences allows this work to serve as an accessible introduction to geologic processes in the study of warfare. More than this, however, Mauldin concludes that *Sand, Science, and the Civil War* presents readers with a thorough understanding of “the evolution of the military geosciences during the Civil War,” as well as “the intersection of geology with Civil War-era artillery, fortifications, mobility, and even morale.” Hippensteel’s work will be appealing for any scholar or general reader interested in both military and environmental history.

Edward B. McCaul’s *The Key to the Shenandoah Valley: Geography and the Civil War Struggle for Winchester* likewise explores the role of geography in military operations. McCaul centers his focus on topographical and environmental changes by focusing on six specific military battles for control of Winchester, Virginia. Yet McCaul does not stop there. As reviewer J. Matthew Ward makes clear, he buttresses his study of the struggle over Winchester by placing these engagements in a larger context, indicating how “the geography of the Valley was crucial to Civil War strategy.” The reader is thus left with a careful study combining military history, environmental history, and political history. When it comes to environmental factors, McCaul takes a similar – though less refined – approach to Judkin Browning and Tim Silver’s *An Environmental History of the Civil War*. Although Browning and Silver display a greater understanding of the historiographic literature, McCaul nevertheless exhibits his strengths as he explores environmental and terrain factors and their influence on the fighting and strategy of armies in the Shenandoah Valley. Ultimately, according to Ward, “the precise depictions of battlefield terrain and army movements, along with a wealth of modern and historic maps, provide an excellent overall strategic walkthrough of this critical Civil War site.”

The American South as a regional space and idea also remains a ripe area of study for environmental historians. For instance, the much-awaited *New History of the American South*, edited by W. Fitzhugh Brundage, draws on a myriad of well-established and current trends in scholarship, including the histories of African diaspora, global history, and environmental history. Examining the region from its indigenous roots to the present, *New History* offers a remarkable historiographic review of southern history. As for our readers, Part II, which features five chapters by Laura F. Edwards, Martha S. Jones, Kate Masur, Gregory S. Downs, and Scott Reynolds Nelson, will garner the most interest. Jones and Masur, for example, describe the hardening of sectional boundaries that eventually led to the Civil War, while Downs presents readers with a detailed overview of southern society, culture, and politics both during and after the Civil War. Littered throughout these chapters is the careful interplay between environmental factors, society, economics, and culture. Reviewer Frank J. Byrne captures the strengths of this “ambitious” new work. Although Byrne contends that “those unacquainted with the relevant historiography will have difficulty appreciating how these essays engage the literature they summarize,” all readers will undoubtedly find much to admire in this sweeping synthesis of southern history.

If the agricultural society of the antebellum South is a welcome area of study for environmental historians then there is also much to be learned about plant histories during the Civil War Era. Judith Sumner’s *Plants in the Civil War: A Botanical History* does just that. Building on her experience as a botanist specializing in ethnobotany, Sumner presents readers with a “plant-centered history of the Civil War.” Slavery, gardening, food, soil nutrients, clothing, and lumber all receive attention. While each chapter conveys the importance of plants to the story of the Civil War Era, the chapter on “Agriculture and Crops” most effectively

captures the interplay between southern society, slavery, and agricultural conditions. In this chapter, according to reviewer and assistant editor Logan Istre, Sumner “offers a concise yet comprehensive survey of agricultural conditions before and during the war, ranging from crops grown, methods used, fertilizer experiments, and wartime shortages.” Her careful use of contemporary farm journals forms the backbone of her analysis, though engagement with more recent agricultural histories, including Ariel Ron’s *Grassroots Leviathan*, might have strengthened the overall project. Nevertheless, there is much to appreciate in *Plants in the Civil War*, and, as Istre concludes, it “makes a welcome interdisciplinary addition to the growing field of Civil War Era environmental history.”

If plants can shed new light on the environmental dimensions of the Civil War, what can we learn about the role of animals during and before the conflict? Earl J. Hess’s *Animal Histories of the Civil War Era* and Christopher Michael Blakely’s *Empire of Brutality: Enslaved People and Animals in the British Atlantic World* both attempt to answer this question. While Hess’s book has been examined by previous reviewers, the emerging interest in animal histories warrants another look. Horses have been a traditional reference point to understanding the animal experience during the Civil War; however, Hess also privileges the role of canines, wildlife, and insects. Such an approach adds to our understanding of how animals often shaped human understanding of wartime experiences. As such, “by spanning the antebellum through post-war Civil War years, *Animal Histories*,” writes reviewer Henry Motty, “also serves as a springboard for future studies that connect the conflict—and its animal participants—into the larger scope of American history.”

The same can be said for Blakely’s *Empire of Brutality* as well. In what is Blakely’s first book, *Empire of Brutality* traces how British enslavers distinguished between people, animals,

and the enslaved. In doing so, Blakely details the “in-between” position in which enslaved people found themselves, underscoring, writes reviewer Owen Clow, how the “process of dehumanization was molded by the material human-animal relationships that structured Atlantic slavery.” The narrative is crafted into thematic chapters, each emphasizing the “the modes of interactions” between enslaved people and animals. Building on Earl J. Hess’s work and mirroring Silkenat’s *Scars on the Land*, Blakely’s latest book opens up new avenues for the study of human-animal interactions, slavery, colonialism, and the Atlantic world. Although Clow contends that the book tends towards animal histories and the history of enslavement more so than traditional environmental history, this does not mean Blakely ignores the environmental dimensions and language that underscored African enslavement. Rather, this work stands as a welcome addition for readers interested in environmental and animal history, as well as the “complex web of interactions between nonhuman animals, enslaved people, and their enslavers.”

It is a pleasure to bring this winter issue of the *Civil War Book Review* to our readers. “Environmental History in Focus” endeavors to highlight new and emerging scholarship on environmental history and the Civil War Era. In doing so, we hope to encourage our readers to explore the complex interactions between the human and non-human world. The environment is never a backdrop in human history; it is an active participant which not only influences events and decisions, but also shapes how humans understand the world. While it is an evolving field of scholarly inquiry, environmental history continues to contribute important interventions in the historiography of the Civil War Era. There remains, however, much room for future research.

Happy reading,
K. Howell Keiser, Jr.

