

## Review

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**Hess, Earl J., ed.** *Animal Histories of the Civil War Era*. Louisiana State University Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$45.00 ISBN 9780807176917 pp. 280.

The chaos and suffering that swept through the United States during the Civil War affected not only humans—but also the animal world. In *Animal Histories of the Civil War*, a team of Civil War scholars argue how animal contributions, such as providing mobility, food, and companionship, not only impacted the way the war was fought, but also determined its outcome and the way it was remembered. Edited by Earl J. Hess, author of *Civil War Logistics: A Study of Military Transportation* and the former Stewart W. McClelland Chair in History at Lincoln Memorial University, *Animal Histories* highlights the relationship and “interaction between animals and humans under extreme duress” within the context of the Civil War era. (2) Hess references how previous studies on animal history, which mostly center on twentieth century conflicts, have better shaped human understanding of wartime experiences. The scholarly analytical probes of the animal experience undertaken by Hess helps bridge a gap in the existing Civil War historiography by intertwining cultural, environmental, and social approaches to the past.

Though domesticated animals, especially equine, usually conjure images connected with the Civil War, this work also explores the roles canines, wildlife, and insects (both literally and figuratively) played in the conflict. Soldiers and civilians did not operate or experience the Civil War era in isolation—many animals displayed “emotion, fear, bravery, hope, and despair,” just like

their human counterparts. And their shared experiences, which has largely been ignored, provide the backdrop for a deeper understanding of the nature of war. (6)

*Animal Histories* is divided into six parts that begins in the antebellum years with Michael E. Wood's essay on the nation's military experiments with camels. This enterprise also provided a front to a darker network aimed at expanding the "Global Slave Power." Not only did the arrival of camels provide U.S. soldiers stationed out west with a new form of desert mobility, but these creatures' abilities quickly caught the eye of many planters. Camels displayed potential as a formidable animal resource of expanding the plantation economy and the institution of slavery, which helped escalate the era's growing sectional and political tension. (35-36) With the eruption of hostilities, the role of equine in providing the "engines of war" encompasses the theme of part two. David J. Gerlman's essay emphasizes the important transportation roles horses and mules provided for the military, a topic which had been largely overshadowed because of technological advances made after the conflict. Though standards for the care and treatment of service animals existed, the wartime demands imposed on equine oftentimes remained harsh. Earl J. Hess's work on Civil War artillery horses shows how soldiers held these animals to a higher standard. Their role of toting artillery pieces, as well as their exposure to combat (and diseases), required greater stamina, courage, and training. Abraham Gibson's study of the wartime evolution of horses and their shifting roles throughout the conflict provides a novel approach for understanding human interactions in the Civil War. For example, he offers a new analysis of the role of horses in the war's surrender terms as Union forces allowed Confederate soldiers to keep their mounts—not necessarily out of goodwill or respect, but "to stabilize the social and domestic spheres of the South." (94)

*Animal Histories* also examines the role of wildlife, a largely understudied and forgotten topic in Civil War historiography. To begin, much of a wild animal's wartime experience centered on the actual battlefield. Moreover, hungry soldiers often supplemented meager rations by hunting and fishing—two activities which took a toll on a region's wildlife population. Hess also notes how insects and microorganisms fit into the Civil War narrative, especially in relation to disease and discomfort; and Mark Smith's "All the Buzz," links human sensory and Civil War era experiences to that of bees, both terminologically and metaphorically. Part four examines the role of animals as a food source for Civil War soldiers, but as Jason Phillips notes, the case of southern hogs and the antebellum idiom, "root hog or die," took on a new meaning for Confederates as a free-range southern hog's struggle for survival became emblematic with the Confederacy's own struggle. (136, 139, 141-142) Hess's essay on the more popular meat diet of Civil War soldiers, who largely favored it over more nutritious fruit and vegetables, proved problematic (and less healthy) for many men. However, these widespread hostile attitudes towards a vegan diet reflected those of mainstream American society even though some advocacy for an alternative diet had roots in antebellum reform movements. In part five, Joan Cashin's and Lorien Foote's works highlight the canine experience of the Civil War era, as dogs held numerous roles as either commodities, a nuisance, a tool of oppression, a victim, or a pet. These canine studies shed light on how these animals brought out both the best and worst in their human caretakers, along with their participation in achieving northern and southern political and military goals, such as serving in battle and upholding white supremacy.

The book's concluding section examines the role of animals in the post-war years as Brian Matthew Jordan explores how Union regimental mascots eventually became part of the military's regimental community. Not only did these creatures win the affection and admiration of their

human comrades, but they also earned veteran status. (212) Daniel Vandersommers’s work delves into Reconstruction and post-war politics showing how the congressional debates over a national zoo not only sparked attempts at reconciliation, but also masked the continued sectional debates that largely centered on the role of the federal government. Paula Tarankow’s essay on “Jim Key and Jim Crow” examines how an ex-slave’s talent and his “horse with the human brain” transcended the worlds of Lost Cause mythology, race, and Civil War memory. (241) This example of humane treatment without coercion reinforced white society’s paternalistic views on race, nodding to both northern reform efforts and the Old South’s flawed perception of master-slave loyalty.

The essays presented in *Animal Histories of the Civil War*, while informative and analytical, are not a definitive or exhaustive study of the animal Civil War experience. Hess’s “fundamental objective” with *Animal Histories* was “to raise the awareness of Civil War scholars to the presence of nonhuman animals in the story of the war.” (2) However, this work provides an excellent blueprint for scholars wishing to embark on new research approaches on understudied topics of human and animal interactions. By spanning the antebellum through post-war Civil War years, *Animal Histories* also serves as a springboard for future studies that connect the conflict—and its animal participants—into the larger scope of American history.

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