War, Politics, & Change

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We are excited to bring our readers the spring 2024 issue of the Civil War Book Review. Historians have long documented the ways in which war and politics bring about social, economic, and cultural change. Nowhere is this more evident than during the American Civil War and Reconstruction. The war devastated the South; it upended the system of chattel slavery and instigated remarkable transformations to the region’s demographics and its political and economic structures. Reconstruction emerged out of the ashes of war. This critical period redefined U.S. citizenship, expanded suffrage rights, and altered the relationship between the federal government and the states. Many of the lofty goals of Reconstruction, however, fell short as southern “Redeemers” regained political power and enshrined a new system of white supremacy. While many of the changes during this era were structural, individuals also experienced personal metamorphoses. Each of the manuscripts reviewed in this issue explore these various transformations, shedding new light on military command and contingency, national and regional politics, and individual struggles as the American nation navigated disorienting change during these fateful years.

We begin this issue with three feature essays from Frank J. Williams, Hans Rasmussen, and Jacob Long. Williams’ “A Look at Lincoln” examines Harold Holzer’s latest book, Brought Forth on This Continent: Abraham Lincoln and American Immigration. Holzer emphasizes the value Abraham Lincoln placed on immigration. Such a focus, Williams contends, “offers a timely reminder that such contentious issues are not unique to our time.” The 1860s witnessed heated debates over immigration. To be sure, this had been a hotly contested issue even before
the war. Southerners celebrated slavery as a preventative check against immigration and many American citizens from all region’s embraced nativist disdain for immigrant communities, ultimately giving rise to the Know-Nothing Party. Lincoln, however, took a strong stand in favor of immigration. He believed it was necessary for “Congress to adopt measures to encourage immigration to bolster labor shortages exacerbated by the war.” Immigration, in his view, was a source of wealth and strength. Yet this view evolved overtime, and Holzer meticulously details this evolution while drawing connections between Lincoln’s thoughts on immigration and his “shifting stance on the issues of Black freedom and rights.” Overall, this presents a captivating examination of a pivotal period in American History. Readers are certain to find Holzer’s book poignant as the nation once again grapples with the question of immigration.

Rasmussen’s “Civil War Treasures” shifts our focus from Lincoln to Charles Sumner, the passionate anti-slavery Senator from Massachusetts. As the sesquicentennial of Sumner’s death approaches, this feature essay presents readers with transcriptions from his personal letters held in the Special Collections at Louisiana State University. According to Rasmussen, “although not the most detailed of missives,” Sumner’s letters nevertheless “all date from significant periods of his tenure in the Senate: the imbroglio over the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Sumner’s assault at the hands of Preston Brooks, and his evaluation of an ever-worsening situation during the secession crisis in the winter of 1861.” What echoes through these writings is Sumner’s irrepressible resolve to stand for the cause of abolition and wage war against “the shield of the giant of slavery.”

Long’s essay takes us out of the realm of historical fact and into the world of historical fiction. Matthew Speiser’s novel, To the Manor Born, places the reader in a world where the Civil War never ended; the Confederate States of America earned its independence and the left
the United States forever divided. For Speiser, the nation is effectively left in a Cold War 150 years after the war concluded. Yet, as Long notes, it is odd that well over a century later the Confederacy remained largely the same as before; no innovation seems to have occurred. They dress in nineteenth-century clothing and remain an agricultural people. However, they also drive the latest BMW’s and have obtained tactical nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, “plantations are still said to be the ‘soul’ of the nation, and rule by the aristocracy has proven to be a far better theory of political governance.” This makes for a convoluted “what if” story. Perhaps greater engagement with historian John Majewski’s work on the economic imaginings of southerners would have grounded Speiser in a more believable setting. Recognizing this, Long chooses instead to focus on the literary treatment of “form.” His literary analysis will be welcomed by readers of fiction, but Long’s brief asides into history will also add context to the author’s missed opportunities to ground his narrative in a believable history. In the end, writes Long, “To The Manor Born is an aesthetic disaster that is only capable of reduction.” While lovers of historical fiction may find the novel compelling, Long argues that Speiser’s form and setting are “suspended in adolescence, stuck in 1860 but somehow still evolving technologically. Culture, rhetoric, laws, and even values have remained unchanged since Edmund Ruffin fired the first shot upon Fort Sumter.”

Two of our contributors, David J. Gerleman and Josh Waddell, review the works of Howell Raines and John Reeves. In Raines’ much anticipated Silent Cavalry: How Union Soldiers from Alabama Helped Sherman Burn Atlanta and Then Got Written Out of History, he seeks to illuminate the story of Alabamians who chose loyalty to Union above all else. This is a welcome addition to recent trends. Christopher M. Rein’s Alabamians in Blue: Freedmen, Unionists, and the Civil War in the Cotton State likewise publicized the exploits of Unionist
Alabamians, many of whom resided in the geographically unique region of Northeast Alabama. Raines, however, expands on this story. By focusing almost exclusively on the 1st Alabama Cavalry, Raines argues that this unit aiding General William T. Sherman’s “March to the Sea” ought to be famous for their exploits. Although not a professional historian, Raines’s journalistic background lends this manuscript a sense of flare. According to Gerleman, Silent Cavalry will undoubtedly “interest general audiences as creative non-fiction, but Civil War or Lost Cause Memory scholars will not find any new arguments or sources.”

While the 1st Alabama Cavalry lacks celebrity status, the same cannot be said for Ulysses S. Grant. John Reeves’s Soldier of Destiny: Slavery, Secession, and the Redemption of Ulysses S. Grant follows Grant’s tumultuous life and his ultimate “reentry and redemption in the Union Army.” Perhaps the strongest aspect of the book, according to reviewer Josh Waddell, is Reeves’s exploration of “Grant’s many flaws,” most notably his “ambivalent attitude towards slavery.” Of course, Waddell is quick to note that Reeves does not omit Grant’s many admirable qualities. His “steadfast dedication to the Union” and his stern action towards secessionism helped Grant achieve redemption during the war years. Still, another book on the famous General is not exempt from criticism. In the end, writes Waddell, students of Grant might want to “look to other options if they are interested in Grant’s military campaigns after Chattanooga or his post-war career.” That criticism aside, however, readers interested in Grant’s family life, his views on slavery, and his Civil War career will find much to admire in Soldier of Destiny.

Students of Appalachia and the Civil War will also find much to admire in Randall S. Gooden’s The Governor’s Pawns: Hostages and Hostage-Taking in Civil War West Virginia. The Civil War in Appalachia took on a unique character. The lack of slavery and the region’s emphasis on small, independent family farms gave birth to communities with divided loyalties.
As Union and Confederate forces engaged in guerrilla warfare throughout Appalachia and the border states, civilians on both sides often found themselves as “the principal targets.” Gooden brings this scene to life as he explores the hostage policy of West Virginia and its impact on the war itself. It is a remarkable achievement as well and reveals the true nature of the policy. As reviewer Riley Sullivan notes, Gooden effectively illustrates that “the taking of hostages not only became a policy to maintain peace within West Virginia, but also to solidify the state’s authority within the Union.” Civil rights and liberties fell under siege due to these policies, and the careful telling of these oft-forgotten practices ultimately helped hasten “the downfall of U.S. hostage polices within the U.S. military.”

While the governor of West Virginia grappled with hostage policies, Governor David Tod of Ohio grappled with his party identity and leadership role in a loyal state during the Civil War. Reviewer Joseph Ricci contends that Joseph Lambert, Jr’s The Political Transformation of David Tod: Governing Ohio During the Height of the Civil War is a welcome addition to the political history of the era. Lambert meticulously illustrates how the war brought about an unlikely “wartime leader who placed the needs of the nation before the platform of his party, despite the risk to his political aspirations.” Lambert’s study takes readers through the early years of Tod’s life shortly at the passage of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 to his attendance at the Democratic convention in Baltimore on the eve of war. In detailing his political career prior to the Civil War, one might expect Tod to share with his north democrats disdain for Lincoln’s policies. However, as Lambert shows, following Lincoln’s Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, Tod spoke out in favor of the measure, declaring the mandate be “heartily endorsed.” Tod, in the end, emerges as a champion of emancipation. Students are thus left with an “insightful” story of political transformation. “As the history field gradually but certainly
moves away from the ‘Great Man’ school of thought, perhaps,” writes Ricci, “an exception might be made for those individuals who, though forgotten by the popular narrative, evolved to fill the role needed in a time of crisis and served dutifully to fulfill the needs of the time.”

If there is still much to uncover from the war years, then this is certainly also the case for the emergence of radical American Democracy and the Reconstruction era. Contributor Stephen Maizlish reviews Ruth Dunley’s “deceptively titled book,” The Lost President: A.D. Smith and the Hidden History of Radical Democracy in Civil War America. Despite the fact that Dunley is “hampered by a paucity of information and documentation,” she nevertheless endeavors to uncover for readers the mysterious life of A.D. Smith, a unique anti-slavery Democrat with an obscure political career. Dunley’s book, write Maizlish, does succeed in “uncovering a life dedicated to republicanism as a would-be president of Canada, a judge who declared the Fugitive Slave Law unconstitutional, and a tax commissioner in the Sea Islands of South Carolina who sought to give land to former slaves during the Civil War.” Much of the story centers on his opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law and his career as a Federal Tax Commissioner on the Sea Islands of South Carolina. Readers will certainly find Smith’s role in these events intriguing, but it still remains unclear as to why Dunley chose the title of Lost President.

Equally intriguing and definitive is Neil Kinghan’s A Brief Moment in the Sun: Francis Cardozo and Reconstruction in South Carolina. Kinghan’s book compliments Dunley’s book insofar as it provides a biographical sketch of a unique political figure. The first African American to hold a statewide office after the Civil War, reviewer Alex Wing posits that Kinghan rightly “emphasizes Cardozo’s tangible contributions to the enduring successes that African Americans could carry forward after Reconstruction’s demise, and into Jim Crow.” From political efforts to mobilize Black South Carolinians to Cardozo’s battles against “endemic
corruption” as Secretary of State, Kinghan’s biography, Wing concludes, offers readers an “authoritative treatment of a critical figure both to South Carolinian Reconstruction and African American history more generally.”

Reviews by Cameron Sauers and Evan Rothera keep us in the Reconstruction era. Sauers’s review of Robert J. Dillard’s Two Counties in Crisis: Measuring Political Change in Reconstruction Texas, explores the political culture in two diverging Texas counties during Reconstruction. According to Sauers, Dillard’s account “shines when Dillard analyzes the Texas Constitution of 1876.” To understand the “indecipherable” Texas constitution, it is necessary to understand its creation through the lens of Reconstruction political battles between Democrats and Radical Republicans. Nevertheless, at times Dillard’s goal in Two Counties in Crisis is an enigma. Sauers ultimately concludes that “it’s unclear whether this work really is a study of the political culture of two divergent counties, a composite biography of central elected officials, or a survey of Texas’ Reconstruction history.” While interesting details and anecdotes warrant an exploration of the book, one is left to wonder if a clearer focus and greater engagement with Reconstruction era scholarship would have helped Dunley’s book meet, much like Reconstruction, reach its “unfulfilled potential.”

The same cannot be said of Drew A. Swanson’s A Man of Bad Reputation: The Murder of John Stephens and the Contested Landscape of North Carolina Reconstruction. Swanson’s book is a political murder mystery of sorts, beginning with John G. Lea’s confession that he assassinated North Carolina State Senator John W. Stephens in 1870. The backgrounds of the men involved and the important marker of “reputation” guides readers through this Reconstruction drama. Moreover, Swanson’s focus on Stephens, “a man who was a North Carolina State Senator for less than two years,” sheds much needed light, reviewer Evan Rothera
contends, “on an episode that has been forgotten, misunderstood, or misremembered by too many people—an episode that reveals a great deal about the events of Reconstruction and the history of the U.S. more broadly.” Scholars and readers interested in Reconstruction, North Carolina political history, and mystery will find much to appreciate in Swanson’s study.

While Reconstruction witnessed political battles for equality in the aftermath of war, similar political battles had also taken place during the course of the war itself. Robert Emmett Curran’s *American Catholics and the Quest for Equality in the Civil War Era* focuses on the efforts of American Catholics, emphasizing that they, too, faced battles for equality alongside Native Americans, African Americans, Jews, and women. It offers readers, David Endres argues, a “meticulously” detailed narrative of Catholic’s involvement in the war. Curran presents “keen awareness of political and military developments,” but it his commitment to the Catholic experiencing during this period that offers readers a glimpse into the “unvarnished history” of struggles over equality. Ultimately, writes Endres, this story stands as “a sad testimony to Catholics’ successful realization of citizenship’s benefits while failing to support others’ liberty and equality.”

Nowhere is this struggle for equality and freedom more apparent than in the abolitionist crusade and the Underground Railroad. Two of our reviewers, Bonnie Loughlin-Schultz and Michelle Norello, explore the dimensions of this struggle in their reviews of Frank J. Cirillo’s *The Abolitionist Civil War: Immediatists and the Struggle to Transform the Union* and Larry A. McClellan’s *Onward to Chicago: Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad in Northeastern Illinois*. What is particularly revealing in Cirillo’s latest work on wartime abolitionism is the way in which the Civil War calmed political radicalism. As Loughlin-Schultz observes, ultimately, “the majority’s wartime shift from moral reformers to political interest
interventionists, their radicalism tempered.” What is left is a tragic story, as countless abolitionists ceded an ideological commitment to Black rights and post-emancipation equality to a narrower wartime win of ending slavery.” This tragedy, however, is juxtaposed against the hopeful Northern star that guided freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad. McClellan’s *Onward to Chicago*, writes Norello, delivers a “compelling account” of the “courageous choices” made by individuals hoping to extricate themselves from chattel slavery. His emphasis on the various Underground Railroads various connections, moreover, delivers a striking contrast to traditional historiographical narratives. Romanticism, Norello maintains, has no place in McClellan’s manuscript, and this gives historians a “model for the future of Underground Railroad studies.”

It is a pleasure to bring this spring issue of the *Civil War Book Review* to our readers. “War, Politics, & Change” endeavors to highlight the transformative nature of war and politics during the Civil War Era. The Civil War and Reconstruction unleashed social, political, and economic revolutions that had both unforeseen and foreseen consequences. In many ways, the immense changes wrought by this period are still unfolding today. As such, each of these works tell us as much about the past as they do the present.

Happy Reading,

K. Howell Keiser, Jr.