

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Robert Cook.** *Civil War America: Making a Nation, 1848-1877.* New York and London: Longman, 2003. 320 pp. \$37.35 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-38107-0.

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## A Focused and Accessible Survey

By now the number of books about the Civil War must outnumber the honored dead. Surveys of the period appear more rarely, because they are tougher to do and a harder sell, being by their nature duller, but one might well be able to build a very roomy house by piling them up and roofing over the top. Robert Cook's *Civil War America* deserves a better fate, because it makes quite a daring move: out of nearly 350 pages of text, less than thirty cover the fighting at all.

There is nothing wrong with such a focus. Cook treats the forging of the American nation from 1848 to 1877, and the war, after all, took up less than one-seventh of that time. Nations are not made only by blood and iron, but by statutes, parties, ideas, the sweat of unfree labor, the winning (for whites) and losing (for Native Americans) of the West, and fourth of July celebrations in Augusta, Maine. As a survey text, *Civil War America* has to notice many things, and has only a few pages to discuss industrialization or slavery, and hardly any time to describe what the southern Reconstruction governments did. It cannot afford side-ventures into the American reform tradition, choice quotations, dramatic panoramas, or a detailed tale of the carnage and idiocy of any one particular battlefield. For those, and, indeed, for a much more insightful and lively story of the age, readers already have recourse: James McPherson's *Ordeal by Fire* (2000), or its more popular and dramatic version, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (2003; 1988). Readers who want a more sympathetic study of the Radicals already have Eric Foner's *Reconstruction* (2002; 1988), and those who really want to be aware that the attack on Charles Sumner was

more than a ritual chastisement with political effects, but a brutal act that did real physical harm, can find that in many other places.

Cook sticks to secondary accounts to frame his argument, which, given the difficulty of access to American archival material from the University of Sheffield, would seem both understandable and reasonable. As so many historians before him have shown, it is not at all necessary to use primary sources for understanding the period: newspapers, manuscripts, government reports, letters to and from the freedmen, soldiers' diaries and missives home, or all the rich, fascinating array of information with which so many social historians have worked over the years. The authors of surveys generally don't have the time and don't see the need for such materials. Where would they put the information found, even if they gathered it? How could the book be kept to a manageable length, one that could be sold for a reasonable price in stores? A good argument can be made for sticking to what most historians in the United States would agree on as the essential story. A survey strong on fresh insights and arguments often trades off its virtues for drawbacks, by skimping on the basic narrative, leaving all but the professional scholar a little baffled as to what was going on.

*Civil War America* is accessible to all. It is easily understandable, and to British readers, who may lack the in-depth knowledge of the era, an excellent beginning. Cook has written a workman-like, sober overview, generally fair and comprehensive, and that should be enough.

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