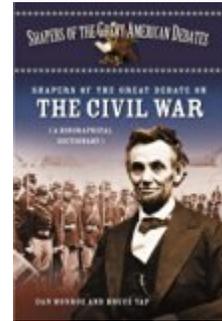


Dan Monroe, Bruce Tap. *Shapers of the Great Debate on the Civil War: A Biographical Dictionary*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005. xxviii + 405 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-31745-3.

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A Civil War of White Men, by White Men, for White Men

Readers of history adore biography and autobiography. For a variety of reasons, the nonfiction halls of most bookstores cater to the cults of personality, the lives of allegedly great or illustrative people. We can learn about the strenuous life of Theodore Roosevelt, the education of Jane Addams, the civil-rights-turned-business-pursuits of Vernon Jordan, the radicalism of Eugene V. Debs, and the faiths of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and the whole host of founding fathers. Even Jesus, Satan, and God have current biographies these days. Tales of individuals have long been methods to illuminate broader trends and currents in American society. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass appropriately titled one of his autobiographies with the phrase “the life and times,” while David Levering Lewis subtitled the first volume of his work on W. E. B. Du Bois, “the biography of a race.” Certainly, there will be no end to autobiographies, biographies, and works that center on a few singular individuals.

Yet the focus on individual lives can sometimes obscure as much about an era as it reveals. This is the case with Dan Monroe and Bruce Tap’s *Shapers of the Great Debate on the Civil War*. This work is written clearly, well researched, and provides numerous insights into the era of the Civil War. But at its depth, the nineteen essay biographies and almost two hundred short biographies cast the saga of the Civil War as principally a white man’s political struggle over the fate of the nation. In the process, the authors provide a vision of the war in which white men act and think, while all others passively observe the

world being destroyed and re-created.

This volume has many merits, especially for high school students, college researchers, and faculty who teach the Civil War. The authors spotlight the careers and ideas of John Brown, James Buchanan, Salmon Chase, Jefferson Davis, Stephen A. Douglas, Frederick Douglass, George Fitzhugh, Horace Greeley, Andrew Johnson, Robert E. Lee, Abraham Lincoln, George McClellan, William Seward, Alexander Stephens, Thaddeus Stevens, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charles Sumner, Clement Vallandigham, and William Yancey. All in all, Monroe and Tap demonstrate the numerous and frustrating political and social dilemmas raised by whether ultimate political power should reside in the federal government or with the states and by the problem of slavery. Although I will not assign this text for my Civil War and Reconstruction courses, I will certainly use the biographies during my lectures and classroom discussions.

The work of Monroe and Tap, however, is troubling in some ways. According to the authors, the “shapers” of debates during the Civil War were white men of the North and the South. Of the nineteen biographies, there is one woman included (Harriet Beecher Stowe) and one African American (Frederick Douglass). The bulk of the material relates the exploits and ideas of John Brown and his “manic” ways, Jefferson Davis and his centralizing tendencies, Abraham Lincoln and his tentative emancipation plans, George Fitzhugh and his pro-slavery scholarship, Robert E. Lee and his struggles with George Mc-

Clellan, Thaddeus Stevens and his arch-radicalism, and several others. The collection follows traditional scholarly routes, identifying the Civil War as furthering American political centralization and industrialization. The issue of slavery, which feels oddly as a secondary topic throughout the work, is primarily a political problem to be either solved or protected. The almost two hundred short biographies at the end provide some greater diversity, but also tend to focus on white men. Thankfully, lists for “further reading” at the conclusion of each main chapter offer readers helpful locations to learn much more about the war and its times.

One wonders why the authors did not include longer biographies of Sojourner Truth, Mary Chesnut, Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, or Martin Delaney. The authors, I would imagine, would contend that these individuals were not the primary movers and shakers in the debates over the Civil War. This assumption, however, privileges a very narrow approach to politics, society, and national history. Moreover, with this individualistic approach, how does one incorporate the crucial actions of enslaved men and women who, as individuals, may have left few written documents? Whether Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves or the slaves freed themselves is not a hackneyed question—it speaks to important concepts of historical agency and social power. A focus on male political elites suggests that ideas, laws, and the government were the most powerful forces in American society. Collective action, subtle resistance, and on-the-ground activities are viewed as secondary.

The authors and publishers contend that these are “those men and women who ‘shaped’ the debates” and hence are the primary historical individuals that students (for whom the book seems directed) need to know. For high school researchers working on papers for their junior or senior year history papers, the chapters of *Shapers of the Great Debate on the Civil War* may be helpful. Yet these students will subtly walk away from the book with the idea that American history, specifically the history

of the Civil War, was primarily a game played by white politicians, that slaves were largely passive victims of an oppressive regime, and that everyone (meaning whites) was pretty racist in the past. And these are not lessons, I would hope, high school history courses, or college ones for that matter, would be encouraging.

More is at stake here than semantics. The focus on white men plays a significant role in how Monroe and Tap imagine the Civil War. Repeatedly, they refer to the war as “tragic.” Yet the war was not a tragedy in the minds and lives of many enslaved African Americans in the South. For a large number of the four million held in bondage, the war was considered God’s work in the nation. Emancipation was the time of Jubilee when they could dance, sing, and celebrate. There is a reason that African American scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois discussed Reconstruction as a tragedy, but not the Civil War. Reconstruction, one could argue, was tragic for all. The white supremacist juggernaut that developed to overthrow radicalism not only hampered African Americans, but also devastated southern white society. For all of the political power they obtained, southern white “redeemers” created closed, fear-based, and violent communities. From many different angles, the failure of radical Reconstruction to reorient American nationalism can be viewed as a tragedy, while the Civil War can be seen as tragic from certain vantage points, but not others.

With the exception of college and high school teachers who could use this volume for historical particulars and some interesting vignettes, I cannot see this book circulating widely. It is too expensive to assign for an undergraduate course, although university and high school libraries may want to have it on their shelves. Any institution with limited financial means, however, could rely on internet equivalents of the chapters contained in *Shapers of the Great Debate on the Civil War*. The debate of the time was great; it is a shame that the same cannot be said for this volume.

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