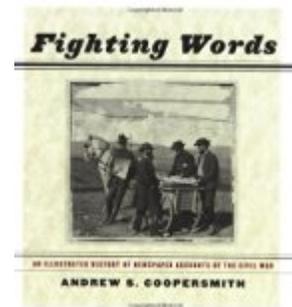


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Andrew S. Coopersmith. *Fighting Words: An Illustrated History of Newspaper Accounts of the Civil War*. New York and London: The New Press, 2004. ix + 325 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56584-796-5.

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A War of Words: The Significance of Civil War Newspapers

Andrew S. Coopersmith's *Fighting Words: An Illustrated History of Newspaper Accounts of the Civil War* is an important new work on a relatively understudied aspect of the American Civil War. Prior to the inauguration of the great conflict at Fort Sumter in the spring of 1861, there were nearly 4,000 newspapers in print in the United States, and in the absence of radio, television, or internet, those papers served as soldiers' and civilians' chief source of information regarding the contest between the North and South. Having examined close to one thousand editorials in more than eighty of these Civil War newspapers, Coopersmith focuses on a few key issues to demonstrate that these papers helped both the Union and the Confederacy in their respective efforts to win the "war of opinion" (p. xxi). He also uses the papers to show that aside from actual battles and campaigns other "bitter struggles raged along political, social, and racial lines, pitting Republicans against Democrats, whites against blacks, rich against poor, women against men, and soldiers against civilians" (p. xxi). In short, Coopersmith's chief argument is that Civil War "newspapers, in exposing these various points of friction, enable us to see the war as the complex and divisive affair that it was" (p. xxi).

Coopersmith divides *Fighting Words* into six sections—"Why They Fought," "Confronting the Enemy," "The Emancipation Proclamation," "Points of Crisis," "The Confederacy Undone," and "Endings and Beginnings"—each of which he further subdivides into two or three chapters apiece. Each section of Coopersmith's work employs newspaper accounts and images to outline the

war of public opinion as it occurred over matters that played important roles in the Civil War. In presenting his evidence, Coopersmith demonstrates the centrality of popular attitudes regarding various issues, including slavery and emancipation, the nature of battle, and relationships between soldiers and civilians. Coopersmith also shows how news of military victories or defeats and reports of enemy behavior in friendly territory influenced the views readers had regarding the progress of the Civil War as well as how such stories affected overall morale on the home front. Regarding the issues of slavery and emancipation, Coopersmith argues that the high number of reports and stories related to these subjects confirms the argument that racial slavery was a fundamental issue during the war in both the North and the South. Such validation, based on evidence from contemporary newspapers, reveals that assertions regarding slavery as the central cause of the war are not simply fabrications that have originated in the imaginations of biased historians as some adherents to the Lost Cause would have people believe.

Part 6 of Coopersmith's *Fighting Words*, "Endings and Beginnings," is arguably the most interesting portion of the book as it deals with the legacy of popular opinion concerning the Civil War. In covering the surrender of Robert E. Lee, Coopersmith uses newspapers to foretell the coming of the Lost Cause and argues that despite having defeated the Confederates on the battlefield, "pacifying the entire scope of Southern public opinion would be another matter entirely" for the Union (p. 263). He also

turns to Southern papers to demonstrate that following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, “many [Southerners] indeed reacted ... with relief, gladness, and even feelings of joyous retribution” (p. 281). In this final section, Coopersmith also employs excerpts from popular papers to deal with the political legacy of the contest and the failures of Reconstruction, concluding his book by writing, “Slavery had torn the United States apart and plunged the North and South into a bloody and highly controversial civil war. The legacy of slavery would prove no less brutal, tragic, and divisive for the nation” (p. 299).

Fighting Words is a fine addition to the historiography of the Civil War as it sheds light on a topic that is generally lost in the shadow of weightier tomes devoted to battles, campaigns, and military biography. This is not

to say that a recounting of the Civil War as it was fought in the daily press is more important than the war waged on the battlefield, where men paid the price of the contest with their lives; it is simply an effort to recognize that the war occurred beyond the battlefield as well. The Civil War was fought in parlors and taverns, it was fought in courtrooms and the halls of Congress, and it was fought on the pages of daily newspapers. And “although millions of men participated personally in the fighting, and countless numbers of civilian—particularly in the South—endured its hardships directly, most Americans experienced the Civil War on a daily basis not through combat but by reading about it in the papers” (p. xiv). Coopersmith does an excellent job of relating this experience in *Fighting Words*, and students of the Civil War would do well to devote some of their time to reading this book.

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