

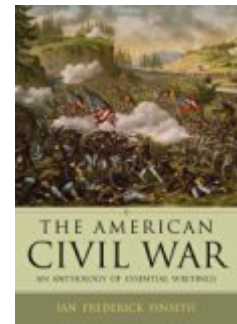
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ian Frederick Finseth, ed. *The American Civil War: An Anthology of Essential Writings*. New York: Routledge, 2006. xv + 629 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-97743-2; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-97744-9.

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An Essential Collection

Ian Frederick Finseth aims to create an anthology that illustrates the Civil War's "influence on the literary imagination and cultural politics of nineteenth-century America" (p. 2). In *The American Civil War*, Finseth gathers a broad collection of documents notable for their wide scope. Sometimes, however, Finseth neglects to provide the documents with enough historical context, which curtails their utility for probing the impact of the Civil War on American imagination and cultural politics. He divides his work into six sections: "Origins," "Battlefields," "African American Experience," "The Civil War in Song," "The Home Front," and "Remembrance and Forgetting." Each section incorporates readings that touch on the respective theme and that range from contemporaneous accounts to ones written through the end of the nineteenth century.

Finseth should be praised for his wide range of selections. Beyond the sections dedicated to the overlooked popular medium of songs and the African American experience of the war, Finseth chooses some individual readings that are pleasantly surprising. Obscure figures of nineteenth-century American literature and authors not usually connected to the Civil War appear alongside such usual suspects as Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Albion Tourgée. Works by physician S. Weir Mitchell and by literary figures like Kate Chopin and Joel Chandler Harris provide unexpected and illuminating perspectives on the Civil War and its influence.

The arrangement of the selections by theme presents the greatest strength of the anthology. Finseth places the works of scattered authors next to each other: Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (1862) abuts Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Boston Hymn" (1863), which rests beside "My Contraband," a selection from Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* (1869). Grouping these disparate works together helps demonstrate the broad and varied ramifications of the Civil War and highlights the wide array of interpretations of the conflict. The thematic arrangement also encourages readers to form new connections between works.

The grouping of readings by topic also leads to the anthology's greatest weakness—a lack of historical context. In section 1, "Origins," readers are presented with excerpts from the *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (1885-6) that discuss the coming of the Civil War, followed by the inaugural addresses of Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln (1861), and then an excerpt from Mary Chesnut's *A Diary from Dixie* (1905). This arrangement prevents thinking about these works historically; Finseth flattens history and presents sources taken from 1861 and then twenty to forty years later on equal terms. This approach inhibits an exploration of cultural politics, because understanding it requires a consideration of the profound chronological and situational differences in which texts were both created and received. A chronological sequential ordering would have made more sense, especially in section 6, "Remembrance and Forgetting." Finseth describes Grant's *Personal Memoirs* as "remarkably free of

the self-vindication, competitiveness, or revisionism that marred the accounts of many other Civil War veterans” (p. 616). While this may be true of Grant’s memoirs when compared to writings of other generals, highlighting the ways in which Grant did engage in self-vindication, competitiveness, and revisionism, as scholars such as Joan Waugh have shown, would have emphasized the ways in which Grant’s writings demonstrate “Remembrance and Forgetting.”[1] In other words, the historical circumstances that helped shape the interpretations of the various authors fade from view.

The author could have alleviated these problems somewhat with greater annotation of the particular texts, especially with brief introductions to each selection instead of a single section introduction. It would also have been helpful if Finseth had made clear if an author had intended their work to be read as fiction or nonfiction. He does include a helpful glossary of specialized military terms that might be unfamiliar to general audiences,

as well as biographical sketches of the authors. On the whole, the biographies capture concisely the lives of the various authors, but in certain instances the annotation lacks adequate perspective (such as with Grant).

Finseth’s book includes many stimulating readings, and his thematic arrangement has its benefits, but greater contextualization would have fostered a better historical understanding of the noteworthy sources Finseth provides. Certainly, creating a fresh anthology of essential writings of the Civil War is nearly an insurmountable task, but Finseth has crafted a collection that includes the classic sources as well as more obscure, yet useful, works.

Note

[1]. Joan Waugh, “Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant: A History of the Union Cause,” in *More Than a Contest Between Armies: Essays on the Civil War Era*, ed. James Marten and A. Kristen Forster (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2008), 219-249.

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