

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Y. Simon, Michael E. Stevens, eds. *New Perspectives on the Civil War: Myths and Realities of the National Conflict*. Madison, WI.: Madison House, 1998. xiv + 172 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-945612-62-9.

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Recent essay collections have proven an effective means of incorporating some of the best work in the field on a given subject. In that regard this slim volume has much to recommend it as it includes work by some of the top scholars in Civil War history. Unfortunately, while some authors shine brightly, taken as a whole the package is disappointing. It is a collection of seven essays loosely grouped around the premise of reanalyzing accepted truths about the Civil War. The purported binding theme is "myths and realities" of the war, however some articles certainly adhere more closely to that theme than others. Additionally, the substance and style of the contributions varies greatly.

This collection arose from a conference held at Wisconsin in 1995 and there lies the main failing of the book. The title boldly proclaims NEW Perspectives when in fact the material is already three years old and no longer really cutting edge. Several of the essays draw on research that has since been published in book length and thus is available in far greater depth elsewhere. For example, serious scholars would turn to Gary Gallagher's *Jubal A. Early, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History*, or James Robertson's *Stonewall Jackson, the Man, the Soldier, the Legend*, rather than these brief essays for a complete study. Other topics, such as the reaction to *Lee Considered* or the failings of Ken Burns as a Civil War historian have certainly been discussed at conferences and in reviews. However, the book may be appropriate for those without the time or inclination to consult numerous volumes, or perhaps for assignment in lower level courses on the problems of the war.

The book begins with promise by leading with Mark Neely's look at the oft quoted subject of "total war." He argues that the WWII experience, marked by the bombing of civilians, colored historians' view of warfare. Conditioned as they were to the destructiveness and brutality of war, these writers looked for the same elements in northern treatment of the South. Neely's extensive knowledge of Lincoln allows him to convinc-

ingly argue that the record does not reflect this view. This concise analysis also serves as a reminder of our need to guard against injecting preconceptions into our work.

Alan Nolan's essay is a discussion of the Lost Cause and Robert E. Lee's place within it. The first half of the chapter rehashes the controversies that attended the release of Nolan's *Lee Considered*; interesting, but again dated. That book was startling when it came out in 1991, but it has been thoroughly critiqued and historians have moved on to discuss newer works on Lee such as *Lee the Soldier* by Gallagher or the release of Freeman's classic in one volume. Readers may find several of Nolan's visions of the war difficult to embrace, such as equating the popular view of the Civil War with an Icelandic Saga or insisting that Southerners were "psychologically impelled to obscure the truth with tales and traditions." His explanation of the Lost Cause is more valuable as he does stress the important point that the war was about slavery, a fact rarely disputed by historians but perhaps a valuable argument to make to the lay reader. The section examining Lee's role as a warrior hero repeats much of the material in *Lee Considered*, which is more worthwhile reading.

The following chapter on Ulysses Grant by John Simon was perhaps intended to balance the Lee portrait, but if so it fails. Moving from General Schwarzkopf on the first page through Grant and McClellan by essay's end, the author presents little new information to the reader. Simon traces Grant's rise to generalship, attributing more to luck than skill, an assessment of scant value without any meaningful analysis. The thesis of "Forging a Commander," that his age made Grant a good general, is unsubstantiated and unconvincing.

Stonewall Jackson is the next candidate for legend unraveling in a smooth essay by his recent biographer. After the obligatory Ken Burns bashing (this in itself seems dated the producer has been thoroughly dissected in both conference panel and book) James Robertson gets to the heart of his essay a balanced explanation of the oddities of Thomas Jackson. While the author does not

deny that Jackson was an odd person, he does not appreciate characterizations of him as a “cold-blooded killer.” Jackson emerges from this treatment as a brilliant, if unusual, soldier who attained greatness and earned respect before an untimely death that cemented his hero stature. Robertson successfully deflates the mystery surrounding Stonewall as he has done in *Stonewall Jackson, the Man, the Soldier, the Legend*.

Gary Gallagher explains the equally misunderstood Jubal Early. A coherently argued essay portrays Early as a consistent man who remained true to a conservative outlook that resisted change. Early emerges as a champion of property rights, hierarchical social structure, and white supremacy. He believed the Constitution guaranteed these principles and thus sought to protect them, first by opposing secession and then by fighting for the South once others had committed Virginia to the cause. This essay successfully explains Early, an often maligned and misunderstood figure in the war, as a stubborn man of strict principles, a characterization more fully explored in the book *Jubal A. Early, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History*.

Joseph Glathaar’s essay on the common soldiers of the war is enjoyable, informative reading. The rank and file gain depth as their habits, behaviors, and daily routine are set forth. Northerners fought to protect the Union, southerners to protect rights and property. They both went to battle with the support of small, mostly rural communities behind them. All dealt with alternating periods of boredom and then sheer terror, with far more time spent in the former. For both sides food was terrible and in short supply, disease rampant, desertion tempting, morals degraded, and religion the only likely savior. However, the North managed to have a referendum on its conduct of the war in the form of the 1864

presidential election while the Confederate administration toiled on with no such public blessing. The points are well taken, yet not markedly different from material already on many bookshelves from Wiley, Mitchell, McPherson, and Glathaar himself.

The volume ends with a weak, disjointed essay with the confusing title “Mirrors Beyond Memories: Afro-Virginians and the Civil War.” It appears to be an obligatory contribution on the role of black Americans in the war, which is an immensely rich topic poorly served here. The text yields a snapshot of pre-war slave life that jumps disconcertingly from topic to topic with little logical flow. Only part of the material actually deals with the war years. The author includes various statistics with no substantiation and fails to adequately address important issues he brings up such as the dearth of slave rebellions during the war. If readers want to learn more about black participation in the Civil War, an excellent goal, they would be better served by reading Benjamin Quarles or McPherson.

Overall, this volume is of mixed quality. As with most collections, the essays vary from excellent to inconsequential, and although many are well-written they offer little new material. If your bookshelf is reasonably well-stocked with recent works on the war you can probably do without this addition, but if you need a concise snapshot of some recent issues it may have a place on your reading list.

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