

# H-Net Reviews

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Charles Pierce Roland. *History Teaches Us to Hope: Reflections on the Civil War and Southern History*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007. x + 353 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2456-8.

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## Whistling Dixie

As the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War approaches we will no doubt be inundated with a litany of books aimed at once again wrestling with that war and its legacy. No doubt some books will be written by kooks and zealots arguing one reason or another why the war was fought. The refrain that it was really all about state's rights, and not slavery, will most assuredly ring again. In this argument there really are no winners. People have already staked their positions on this much like Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee did in and around Petersburg, Virginia in 1864-65.

The distinguished southern historian Charles P. Roland, no kook and no zealot, offers us his position, in a series of essays, on this eternal question about the Civil War. He clearly belongs in the "state's rights" camp. His book, *History Teaches Us To Hope: Reflections on the Civil War and Southern History*, articulates his position clearly, lucidly, and with superior prose. While the author is to be admired for his accomplishments, contributions to the literature, and his oeuvre, his argument remains unconvincing. Roland remains entrapped by the tenor of the times and cultural norms of the Old South, for clearly this is an unabashed paean to what once was, became myth, but has remained lodged in the recess of American memory. The title of his concluding essay, "The Ever-Vanishing South," speaks volumes, reflecting a bit of defensiveness: "The prospect of a southern transformation is usually looked upon as being highly desirable, especially by the liberal journalists and college professors who do the bulk of the writing on the subject. The South has traditionally been regarded as the black sheep of the American community—a willful, delinquent child who has somehow failed to shape up to the national standards" (p. 319). Drawn from the words of Lee, clearly a hero of Roland's, the title of the book suggests after reading the text that the nation might somehow return to those days of *Gone with The Wind* (1936), albeit with

attitudes of white southerners towards blacks improved.

The book is divided into four distinct sections, the first of which explores Roland's role as a World War II infantryman, featuring his famous "GI Charlie" speech. Parts 2 and 3 consist of a series of essays on the Civil War: the first, "Secession and the Civil War," examines why the war came and southern reaction to the war. Of particular interest here is a fabricated letter that appears as a chapter called "A Slaveowner's Defense of Slavery," written in January 1861 from a Louisiana plantation owner to a northern friend in Freeport, Illinois. The letter, Roland asserts, is a composite of attitudes and opinions the author has "gleaned ... from thousands of letters and diary entries of the times" (p. 133). The problem here is that it there is nothing new offered. While the conceit may work here on a stylistic level, the rest of the section is hampered in that Roland fails to take on arguments by African American scholars such as John Hope Franklin, or others from that camp such as Ira Berlin or David Blight. To have done so would at least have given a modicum of credence to works of those on the other side. Nowhere in the text or the notes can those positions be found. However, in the next section, "Civil War Leadership," four never-published essays examine the generalship and command ability of primarily Lee, with extensive discussion about Albert Sidney Johnston and Stonewall Jackson. In this context Roland has no difficulty in confronting analysis offered by Alan Nolan in his book *Lee Considered* (1991). To Roland, Nolan's attempt to debunk the myth of Lee the general is anathema, an unfair and biased criticism replete with the bashing of a sacred symbol. The wounds run deep here, as does a certain lack of objectivity. No matter how one feels about these issues, the problem is that the arguments raised are repeated ad infinitum and the repetitive nature diminishes the power of Roland's position.

Pleasurably, the last section, “The South in Fact and Myth,” contains a wonderful essay on Kentucky governor and Major League Baseball’s second commissioner, Albert “Happy” Chandler, who guided professional baseball through its time of integration in the mid-twentieth century. Yet at some level there is a sense of apologetics at work in the inclusion of a brief, but informative biography of Chandler’s life. It seems odd that an essay on the

“American pastime” would find itself square in the midst of a book about southern memory, but then again, like other parts of *History Teaches Us to Hope*, it’s a stretch. In no way is Roland’s scholarship to be faulted. But what stirs on these pages is a sense of overriding “preferred memory.”

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