

H-Net Reviews

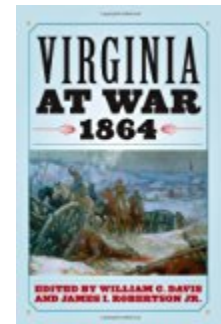
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William C. Davis, James I. Robertson, eds. *Virginia at War, 1864*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009. xii + 242 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2562-6.

Reviewed by Steve Rockenbach (Virginia State University)

Published on H-CivWar (July, 2010)

Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson



Understanding Virginia at War

William C. Davis and James I. Robertson Jr.'s latest volume in their series on the Civil War in the Old Dominion, *Virginia At War 1864*, arrives on shelves just as the debate over the meaning of this conflict in Virginia intensifies. Even before Governor Bob McDonnell's ill-prepared proclamation of April to be Confederate History Month, Virginians have been preparing for the upcoming sesquicentennial by hashing out the old arguments over the causes and nature of the war. The governor's initial omission of slavery from his decree for celebration and remembrance of the sacrifice of Virginia Confederates is representative of the debate over commemorating the war in the twenty-first century. Indeed, prior to the proclamation a skirmish occurred in the pages of the *Richmond Times Dispatch* over whether Richmond should explore the dark crevices of the city's social history or embrace the battles-and-generals approach in order to cash in on tourism. Although the squabbling over the representation of the war during the sesquicentennial continues, this addition to the scholarship on Virginia's collective Civil War experience holds the high ground and sets the stage for the sesquicentennial commemoration. This latest addition to our understanding of the military, social, economic, and culture aspects of the war offers support to the call for a comprehensive approach to the conflict and its consequences.

Davis and Robertson have once again compiled a collection of essays that challenge the hackneyed "Lost Cause" interpretation and add a much-needed human dimension to this important conflict. Following in the

pattern of the three previous volumes in the series, *Virginia At War, 1864* includes the research of a wide range of scholars who have studied the wartime experience of Virginians. Essays on various topics including agriculture, politics, transportation, education, and emancipation are followed by an excerpt from Judith Brockenbrough McGuire's diary. Although the year 1864 is used as an organizational principle, the essays usually cover the entire war and focus on themes and events most relevant to Virginia's wartime experience during that time. The essays nicely complement one another and illuminate many significant themes, including war weariness, privation, and misinformation.

The volume opens with Richard J. Sommers's narrative of military operations in Virginia during 1864. The rest of the essays are primarily social or cultural history, but Sommers gives the reader a concise treatment of the battles and campaigns, such as the Wilderness, Bermuda Hundred, and the initial fighting around Petersburg. Sommers offers the "big picture" of the war while providing context for the essays that follow. The desperate nature of military matters in 1864, especially the inroads made into central Virginia by Ulysses S. Grant's forces, underscores the political tension in Virginia. This essay provides a good introduction for those readers not well versed in Civil War military history or simply in need of a refresher course on the military occurrences of 1864.

Aaron Sheehan-Dean's essay on politics bears out

the impact of prolonged war on society by showing how Confederate citizens divided politically over major wartime issues. Both the bread riots of 1863 and the Emancipation Proclamation spurred controversy and debate, even though there were no formal political parties. Sheehan-Dean effectively argues that disagreement over how to provide relief for suffering civilians and protect the stability of slavery became the central political issue for Confederate Virginians. His discussion of the Virginia legislature's early effort to offer "voluntary enslavement" of free black Virginians underscores the interpretation of slavery as central to secession and the Confederate cause. Ted Tunnell's essay on Confederate newspapers further advances the understanding of the war's place in Virginia politics, with special attention to press coverage. Tunnell shows that Virginia's newspapermen consciously worked to bolster patriotism and shield readers from the news of military defeats. However, many of these same newspapers also openly criticized Confederate president Jefferson Davis. Only the *Richmond Enquirer* consistently defended Davis's actions. These first two essays effectively lay the groundwork for an understanding of how the burden of war affected the formation of politics in Confederate Virginia. As Union troops advanced into the heart of Virginia, military setbacks and the pressure of fighting a war at home factionalized white Virginians. If there was any political consensus among white Virginians at the onset of the war, Sheehan-Dean and Tunnell demonstrate that by 1864 the state's political atmosphere was heavy with conflict.

A few of the effects of prolonged war on Virginia's economy are nicely depicted in Bradford A. Wineman's and Ginette Aley's respective essays on transportation and agriculture. Wineman describes how the state's all-important railroads suffered from labor and material shortages and struggled to turn civilian lines into an efficient military supply system. Neither Richmond's nor Petersburg's multiple railroads actually linked up before the war. While the cross-city transport of goods from one rail line to the other was good business before the war, it was one of many wartime supply challenges Virginia's leaders faced. This essay in particular fits the volume's chronological theme. Wineman attributes much of the transportation break-down in Virginia to events in 1863 and 1864, including rising fare prices, Union raids, and Grant's progress during the Overland campaign. Aley's research on the changes in agriculture in Virginia reveals a similar theme. The Old Dominion's prewar agriculture market was geared toward cash crops and relied on Midwestern farms to supplement food production. Con-

federate Virginians attempted to adapt their agricultural habits to wartime conditions, and thus struggled to feed soldier and civilian alike. The food shortages and agricultural limitations culminated in riots, theft, and privation by 1864. Both Union and Confederate armies demanded food and livestock from Virginians, but in the end there was simply not enough to go around. These essays strengthen the interpretation of the Confederacy as crumbling under the strain of war. In many ways, Virginia's bid for independence from the Union was confounded by the fact that economically the state did not have the infrastructure or agriculture to stand alone and fight a war at the same time.

Although strong on politics and economics, this volume also offers two essays that describe cultural aspects of Virginia's wartime society. Jared Bond explores the commemoration of the Fourth of July in Virginia during the war. Bond relates the efforts of some Virginians to celebrate the Fourth in remembrance of the Virginians who declared independence from Great Britain while fighting what Confederates saw as a similar struggle for independence. However, the double defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in 1863 made the holiday unsuitable for even Confederate versions of the celebration. Again, the last full year of the war marks the shift towards somber acceptance of the war's burden and a realization that the war was going poorly. Most white Virginians lost enthusiasm for the holiday at the end of the war, while black Virginians embraced the Fourth in 1865 and afterwards. While Bond's essay shows the Confederate struggle to create a separate nationalism, William C. Davis argues that Virginia's literature is proof of both patriotic zeal and an insatiable desire to read. Davis compiles an impressive list of books and periodicals, most of which were specifically about the war. However, there is little analysis of the stories themselves and what they tell us about the values and popular concepts of Confederate Virginia. Davis admits that few of the works he describes went on to lasting popularity, and one surmises that most were probably pretty bad. However, it is important to note that in the midst of the hardship noted in other essays, at least some white Virginians were eager to read uplifting stories about the Confederate war effort.

Historians are doing better at capturing the everyday issues of wartime society, but education remains an understudied subject. Peter Wallenstein's research on higher education during the war uses the 1864 Battle of New Market as an entry point to the history of education in the Confederacy. The famous contribution of Virginia Military Institute cadets to the battle's outcome is

one of many examples of how the war affected education. Wallenstein notes that most changes to higher education were less dramatic, but still important to understanding wartime society. Virginia's colleges and universities experienced a shortage of students, faculty, and supplies during the war, and more than a few campus buildings became temporary hospitals or barracks. Wallenstein concludes that the war had a negative effect on most of the institutions of higher education, causing some to close and others to come dreadfully close. The major change the war brought about was creation of schools for freedpeople and state funding for some new institutions of higher education. This last point is one of Wallenstein's most compelling, but unfortunately serves as the conclusion of his essay. Wallenstein mentions the founding of what would become Virginia State University, but omits the intriguing fact that former Confederate general and Readjuster Party leader William Mahone was instrumental in passing the legislation that created the school. Additionally, the influence of Freedmen's Bureau schools and the beginnings of Virginia Union University in what was previously Lumpkin's slave jail are also worthy of mention. Perhaps the next volume of this series will offer even more insight into how black Virginians experienced the war and seized opportunities for education, prosperity, and advancement.

A short but well-researched community study anchors the interpretive essays in this volume and leads into the annotated diary entries. J. Michael Cobb outlines how Hampton became a beacon of freedom for Virginia slaves and source of contention for the few remaining secessionist civilians. Union occupation quite literally shaped Hampton's development, because fleeing Confederates burned the town during their departure in 1861, and during the rest of the war Union forces built up the area around Fort Monroe. Cobb's meticulous research on how soldiers, civilians, and former slaves experienced

war on the local level represents the type of research that Virginia sorely needs. The stagnant Lost Cause interpretation of the war in Virginia has thrived on broad generalization and the sole emphasis on the experiences of military men and a few select elite civilians. Cobb's essay, and the entire volume taken as a whole, provide a refreshing view of wartime Virginia from the bottom up.

This collection serves to remind us that there is much for us to discover beyond Virginia's battlefields. Judith Brockenbrough McGuire's detailed diary entries provide an effective conclusion to this collection. McGuire describes the apprehension and uncertainty many civilian refugees experienced, but she also echoes some of the themes and subjects of the essays, including transportation difficulties, unreliable newspaper reporting, and waning enthusiasm for celebrating the Fourth of July. Recently, there has been an impulse to annotate and publish every existing Civil War diary and letter collection. Many of them are simply not that insightful, but McGuire's diary offers a much-needed dimension to the scholarship in this volume and is simply a very good read.

Virginia does not suffer from any lack of attention from Civil War scholars, but this latest volume in the Virginia at War series points to some new directions for research and offers some new support for current interpretations. Davis and Robertson have created a series that is both accessible to interested readers and useful to academics. The essays are all concise and to the point, but historians will easily recognize the important contributions to the historiography of the war in Virginia. Instructors teaching courses on the Civil War era may also find this and previous volumes helpful in updating and augmenting lectures and encouraging discussion of topics beyond that of the battlefield. Most importantly, this series offers a model for the sesquicentennial commemorations and a firm promise to tell the entire story of the Civil War in Virginia.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Steve Rockenbach. Review of Davis, William C.; Robertson, James I., eds., *Virginia at War, 1864*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30155>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.