

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

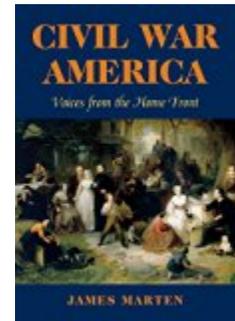
James Marten. *Civil War America: Voices from the Home Front*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. xiii + 341 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-2794-5.

James Marten, A. Kristen Foster, eds. *More Than a Contest between Armies: Essays on the Civil War Era*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2008. xii + 309 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-912-9.

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## The War Still Rages: The Civil War Interpreted

In *More Than a Contest between Armies*, James Marten and A. Kristen Foster have put together a strong collection of essays by some of the foremost Civil War scholars. These twelve essays, compiled from various addresses given in conjunction with Marquette University's Frank L. Klement Lectures: Alternate Views of the Sectional Conflict, reflect an array of perspectives on the Civil War that cohere through their exploration of "un- or under-examined events, people, and points of view" (p. xi). Each essay seeks, in various ways, to explain some aspect of the Civil War—a conflict that with every generation of historians becomes even more complex. This year, as we enter the cavalcade of commemorations centered on the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, the legacy of the war is as contested as ever, as seen in the rich field of memory studies that has emerged over the past decade and in the ways in which the Civil War has become entangled with contemporary politics. As Edward Ayers notes succinctly in his essay, "it is easy to see why the Civil War is so perplexing," and together, these essays strive to make sense of some of the more convoluted arguments and debates that have reverberated beyond the battlefields and into modern American discourse (p. 2). More than simply an assortment of essays by first-rate historians, Marten and Foster's compilation (which includes pieces delivered between 1994 and 2005) highlights many of the major historiographical themes that have defined

Civil War studies over the last twenty years.

The collection works as a veritable Who's Who of recent Civil War scholarship, with the essays refracting various thoughtful perspectives on the past. Many of these authors presented their lectures at the cusp of new projects and published works, which allows for an engaging look at several bedrock elements of Civil War historiography. Thus, we have David Blight discussing his work on memory just prior to the publication of *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001); Ayers outlining the origins of his Valley of the Shadow Project; George Rable providing context for his work on Fredericksburg; Catherine Clinton examining the complex world of women in the South; and Gary Gallagher underscoring the importance of the Lost Cause. All of the essays are strong and many work as useful encapsulations of larger works. Interestingly, from this distance—fifteen plus years later—as dated as the earlier lectures may seem (they make mention of CD-ROMs, a term that today seems odd to even type), these essays illustrate how much of the current conversation on the Civil War owes to the pioneering work of scholars in the 1990s.

Overall, this collection hangs together well, especially considering that compilations of lecture symposia often tend to produce somewhat clunky collections, and

credit should be given to both editors for selecting the appropriate pieces and organizing a unified volume. Reading these essays years later, it is a tribute to the Klement Lectures that so many of the themes that have defined Civil War historiography over the past decade—the use of technology, the significance of memorialization, the role of gender in the conflict—were delivered, often in their infancy, by the invited scholars who helped pioneer much of the new Civil War scholarship. As these essays were originally written for an audience of undergraduates and Civil War enthusiasts as well as university faculty and scholars, this collection should appeal to a wide range of people. Many of the historians writing for this collection tend to reflect on their research interests at the time, and these essays serve to introduce nonacademics to some of the strongest Civil War studies of the past twenty years. The editors include a brief and fairly subjective “Suggested Readings” list, but the book works best as an anthology of twelve renowned scholars thoughtfully considering the meaning of their own work within the context of the larger quest to better understand the full impact and meaning of the American Civil War.

The historian responsible for the Klement Lectures, Marten, is currently chair of the History Department at Marquette University and has devoted much of his research to the story of children in nineteenth-century America. Author of *The Children’s Civil War* (1998) as well as editor of *Children and Youth in a New Nation in America* (2009), *Children and War: A Historical Anthology* (2002), and *Childhood and Child Welfare in the Progressive Era: A Brief History with Documents* (2004), Marten has provided profound studies of an important, if often overlooked, segment of the American population. In 2007, Marten expanded his historical purview by examining the various dimensions of civilian life during this period with his book, *Civil War America* (originally published in 2003 by ABC-CLIO). Divided into five parts covering both Southern and Northern civilians, children, African Americans, and many other important and often-ignored groups, Marten’s book seeks to bring diverse voices into harmony with one another. He includes famous individuals alongside many people who previously went unnoticed as a way to underscore the diversity and complexity of the American experience throughout the Civil War era. Each chapter has a selection of primary and secondary sources and a brief bibliographic essay caps off the volume. The historiography is a bit dated (even considering that the book was released in 2007), particularly in terms of memory studies, but many may find pleasure in the well-written and touching vignettes.

The first two sections of the book detail the experiences of Southern and Northern civilians during the war and include discussions of Edmund Ruffin, Southern refugees, Confederate dissenters, George Templeton Strong, journalists, nurses, and the New York City Draft Riots. Most of these pieces are straightforward thumbnail sketches of familiar groups and people, but generalities abound, a flaw that is clearly seen in the chapter on Southern women. “Civil War women were sometimes subject to debilitating fear, loneliness, and weariness that could lead to fights with in-laws and landlords, to short tempers and impatient outbursts, and to depression so deep that they became ill, lost sleep, and withdrew from their children.” “Of course,” Marten concludes, “many, if not most, women persevered admirably” (p. 17). True, perhaps, but a vague and assuming observation nonetheless. However, the papers he quotes from—primarily Lizzie Neblett’s letters—are engaging and provide a unique glimpse into the lives of less recognizable Civil War characters. For the most part, Marten combines primary and secondary sources with a minimum of interpretive interruption, an approach he continues in the other sections, which provides for a readable if not necessarily groundbreaking collection of intimate sketches from the conflict.

Not surprisingly, the strongest part of the book relates to Marten’s long-time exploration of the history of children. His writing here is sharp and he allows the primary sources to shine through this section. At times Marten uses a comparative approach by contrasting the experiences of young Northerners and young Southerners; even if the conclusions are not too surprising (Southern children tend to see the war as much more of a tragic experience than their Northern counterparts), the source material is interesting. This section on children is strong and, thus, it dominates the work, standing in contrast with some of the book’s more primary weaknesses. The section on African Americans, for example, is brief and tends to gloss over exceptionally complicated relationships and contexts. Again, as with other sections, the writing tends toward generalizations, which is unfortunate considering the rich primary sources Marten is mining. Overall, however, *Civil War America* underscores the diversity of people that populated the Civil War landscape and stands as a reminder of the number of voices that often get overshadowed in the historiography.

Together, *More Than a Contest between Armies* and *Civil War America* provide for an expansive as well as molecular view of the Civil War. And though questions of prospective audience remain—especially *Civil War*

*America* as it straddles the line of classroom reader and popular history—these two books showcase the diversity of perspectives that contribute to the ever-evolving history of the Civil War, both in terms of subject as well as scholar. As Ayers, in his essay on the Valley of the Shadow in *More Than a Contest between Armies* argues, “we might better understand familiar national events by seeing the many ways in which they were interpreted and reinterpreted by the people who had no choice but to act in response” (p. 3). Ayers’s comment connects the aims of these volumes, and as the sesquicentennial begins these two books are reminders of the multiplicity of viewpoints, topics, and themes that shape our understanding of the Civil War.

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