

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bud Hannings. *Every Day of the Civil War: A Chronological Encyclopedia.* Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2010. v + 631 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-4464-9.

Louis P. Masur. *The Civil War: A Concise History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 136 pp. \$18.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-974048-2.

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Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson



Summarizing the Civil War

In these unique works, two accomplished historians take diverse approaches to commemorating the sesquicentennial of the Civil War for a general reading audience. Louis P. Masur is a cultural historian with an eclectic choice of subjects, among them capital punishment in early America, baseball's first World Series, and Bruce Springsteen's celebrated album *Born to Run*. Bud Hannings is an independent scholar with reference works on the French and Indian War, the American Revolution, and the Korean War to his credit. The result is two very different books that demonstrate the wide variety of analytical approaches that are available to anyone interpreting the greatest military, political, and social conflict in United States history. Indeed, one can put down these extraordinarily readable texts and wonder if they are describing the same conflict.

Masur's pocket-sized chronological account of the Civil War packs a powerful punch. In spite of the countless number of published narratives of the Civil War, this 94-page history stands out. In fact, junior and high school teachers of the Civil War, as well as college and university teachers of the first half of the United States survey, may have found the perfect affordable and concise one-volume account of both the war and its causes. It is hard to overstate this accomplishment, as so many have tried before and failed.

Masur's tutelage under James McPherson at Princeton University infuses the book's two central themes: (1) what began as a limited war evolved quickly into a total war, and (2) that the abolition of slavery became over the course of the war a central objective of both the president and the United States government. Though few knowledgeable persons would disagree with either of these premises, the attention each receives briefly at the introduction and then throughout the text gives the book a solid foundation. But this is only the beginning.

With a deft hand, Masur touches briefly on the major touchstones of antebellum America that led ultimately toward secession, including the Nullification Crisis, the Compromise of 1850, the Dred Scott case, and John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Once the war begins, he gives appropriate attention to other important topics, from the technological explosion the war promoted—including the transition from smoothbore to rifled muskets and the use of photography—to the federal government's role in promoting economic and geographic expansion through the Homestead Act and Morrill Act of 1862 and the National Banking Acts. These and other salient topics Masur integrates seamlessly into the larger story of slavery, secession, and unlimited war. An additional bonus is the centering of Abraham Lincoln in the narrative, from his election in 1860 to his assassination in 1865. In this way, the personal and public tri-

als and tribulations of the sixteenth president serve as a metaphor for the entire nation during its most trying time.

Hannings's 500-page chronological encyclopedia of "Every Day of the Civil War" is a different animal altogether. Covering the period from 1861 to 1865 primarily, he draws from a massive universe of official government records to recount painstakingly the combat history of the war. Paying special attention to battles and skirmishes on both land and sea, he also documents more mundane and less-studied events, such as the promotion and demotion records of Northern and Southern officers, the commission and decommission dates of sailing vessels, and the surprising role of women both on and off the battlefield. The balanced approach to the Northern, Southern, and Western theaters of the war broadens the book's appeal additionally. Lengthier entries on major clashes such as the battles of Shiloh, Antietam, and Gettysburg provide concise and reliable accounts regarding officer and troop movements, weapons and medical support deployment, and the numbers of dead and wounded. The attention to detail is often extraordinary, though additional illustrations would have helped the most sensational leaders and battles leap from the page. Adding to the book's value as a reference source are a comprehensive index and a series of appendixes that provide such useful information for researchers as a roster of Union and Confederate generals and a list of the recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor between 1863 and 1865.

The emphasis on officers and battles belies the book's title, which promises a day-by-day rendering of the "Civil War" and not just the actions of soldiers and the movement of their vehicles. Readers expecting to learn more about the many social disruptions the war sparked, the landmark legislation passed by the Republican Congress, or the historic words uttered by Lincoln and other prominent men and women, will be disappointed. Notwith-

standing the book's claim to comprehensiveness, this is a military encyclopedia; thus, where Masur roots his narrative in both the causes of the war and its powerful effects, Hannings glosses over and more often avoids such ideological concerns. One conspicuous example suffices: while Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation garners one sentence, so do a skirmish in Missouri, the retreat of a reconnaissance force in South Carolina, and the promotion of an obscure officer in Arkansas. Clearly, the president's executive order to abolish human bondage and reinvent the republic deserves more.

An unrelated concern is organization. The book progresses chronologically, with the date of the year marked clearly at the top of each page. Many of the entries that follow begin with their dates of occurrence in boldface. Just as many, however, lack a specific date at the beginning or anywhere else in the first sentence, or omit information regarding a specific date altogether. While a close examination reveals the editor's decision to leave entries undated that follow a dated entry, this leaves the casual reader unsure of the actual date of any given event. The effort required to review paragraphs of varying lengths for the exact day an event occurred is frustrating and at first fruitless.

Taken together, these books will disappoint professional historians seeking new insight and argument, as they should. For their intended audiences are not academics but students and anyone else interested in the Civil War. Masur's book will assist those hoping to acquire quickly and cheaply a dependable overview of the Civil War and its causes, from a historian's point of view. Hannings's encyclopedia will satisfy hardcore military history buffs, though bare spots on their bookshelves and coffee tables may remain so as a result of the book's considerable cost. One thing both volumes make clear, is that 150 years after the commencement of the Civil War the event remains open to a wide variety of interpretations and publications.

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