

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel E. Sutherland. *Seasons of War: The Ordeal of a Confederate Community, 1861-1865*. New York: The Free Press, 1995. vii + 488 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-02-874043-0.

Reviewed by Crandall Shifflett (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University)
Published on H-CivWar (April, 1996)



This is the story of forty-eight months of war in Culpeper County, Virginia, told largely in the present tense, employing the metaphor of seasons to mark the changing fortunes of the Confederacy, from the buoyant spring of 1861, through the mature summer of 1862, waning autumn of 1863, and morbid winter of 1864-65. Illustrated by thirty-two well-chosen photographs, this impressively documented work is Daniel Sutherland's response to Walt Whitman's prediction that "the real war' will never get in the books."

Culpeper was a county of strategic military importance because of its natural location between the Union and Confederacy. Consequently, great figures stride across the stage, such as Confederate generals Lee, Jackson, Ewell, and Stuart and Union generals Grant, Custer, Meade, and Pope. Important battles were fought in the county at Cedar Mountain and Brandy Station; and it was a staging area for the battles of First and Second Manassas, Gettysburg, and the Wilderness. From the "perch" of a single community, Mr. Sutherland is able to give readers a view of the "gritty and grisly" (p. vi) side of this war in terms of the sights and sounds of screaming and whizzing shells, the dull thud of shot hitting bodies, blood gushing from wounds, and arms and legs suddenly being torn away.

And because of Culpeper's location and importance, the war engulfed the civilian population. As the Confederate and Union armies alternately occupied and abandoned the county, soldiers foraged for food, destroyed buildings and fences, killed livestock, and took up temporary residence in homes as invited or uninvited guests. So many inhabitants fled the county that by the war's end only 80 citizens remained in Culpeper. Many could not stand to stay and watch as hogs rooted up bodies of sol-

diers hastily buried in shallow graves, flocks of carrion crows fed on dead horses and livestock, and heavy rains washed the bones of victims out of the ground.

As the war entered its summer of maturity, the slave population grew restless and defiant. Some flaunted their freedom by dressing in their owners' clothes and refusing to work; one of William Colbert's twenty slaves murdered his daughter. With the invasion of General Pope's army, large numbers of fleeing slaves slowed the movement of the troops. When Pope's forces began to depart, slaves followed on foot and in rickety wagons loaded with their few belongings, some taken from their masters. They stuck to the occupation army like glue and felt they had reached the Promised Land when they crossed over the Rappahannock River. The army hired some slaves as laborers, and Union officers hired a few as personal servants. The exodus continued for the remainder of the war.

As the agony of war drew to a close, the people of Culpeper became more and more disheartened, deserters and marauders prowled the countryside, intolerance toward unionists increased, and Confederate troops, out of frustration, executed a detachment of black Union soldiers at Brandy Station.

The author experiments with various techniques to make the war seem more real and immediate. Not everyone will be satisfied with these innovations. Many will be disappointed at the lack of interpretation. The authorial voice never emerges, no viewpoint interrupts the story. Rather, the narrative flows relentlessly, almost seamlessly; nothing propels it except endless pain, suffering, and destruction. Even the metaphor of changing seasons does little to break the seemingly inexorable plunge into ever-increasing despair over the war's out-

come. Readers are left to ponder what it all means.

The use of the present tense to give immediacy to the narrative may distract some readers. History teachers will have to resist the urge to write “tense change” in the margins. Mr. Sutherland also occasionally imitates the colloquial expressions of his diarists. He even invites readers to pretend that they do not know the outcome. He has Culpeper’s citizens sometimes reflecting an understandably fragmentary knowledge of the events of the war, such as the Battle of Fredericksburg or Gettysburg. Those who cherish the historical narrative will find some of these techniques a salutary antidote to problem solving history. Those who like their history with interpretation will be disappointed.

Others will have cause to be troubled about the incongruence between the competing ends of community and national history. Local history and the reconstruction of the stories and experiences of Culpeper’s inhabitants does enhance understanding and lend realism to national events. Yet the exhaustive and comprehensive treatment of Culpeper and the nation at war tends to countervail many of the advantages of limiting the geographical scope. Scores of characters make cameo appearances, come into and go out of focus, all with such

frequency and brevity that the work takes on a kaleidoscopic quality. The final chapter tells the story of what happened to a few of the characters afterwards and shows how less might have been more in earlier parts of the work.

These problems aside, Mr. Sutherland has written an absorbing, unromantic account of this grisly conflict. Those who want a readable book on the Civil War that is free from historiographical diversions and detailed discussions of military strategy, one that blends military history with homefront experiences to give a holistic and realistic experience of the war will find this book satisfying. He takes us from the terror and chaos the soldiers experienced on the battlefield, into the ghastly disease-ridden hospitals, from the lowly cabins of small farmers to the generals’ headquarters, from the hopelessness in the slave quarters to the joyfulness of the “contraband of war” in the Promised Land. It is a welcome addition to the Civil War corpus of general texts, biographies, battlefield narratives, and unit histories.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

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

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

Citation: Crandall Shifflett. Review of Sutherland, Daniel E., *Seasons of War: The Ordeal of a Confederate Community, 1861-1865*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. April, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=381>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.