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Joan E. Cashin, ed.. *War Matters: Material Culture in the Civil War Era.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 280 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-4320-5.

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As a historian who has worked for thirty years mining a rich museum collection of Civil War objects, documents, and photographs to create exhibits and write articles, I welcome a pioneering new book of essays on material culture in the Civil War era, especially one written and edited by some of the best historians in our field. *War Matters* is a useful introduction to a still largely unfamiliar subfield, and it certainly provides valuable insights and context for those who work with objects. On the whole, however, I find the collection underwhelming and its insights less original and profound than I had hoped. Too often the essays did not pass my "so what?" test. I concede that I may have expected too much and that the problem may lie less with the essays than with the reviewer.

The essays range chronologically from the 1850s to the war's concluding events and cover a wide range of topics from the ordinary to the unexpected. Jason Phillips analyzes the conflicting definitions and symbolic uses of John Brown's famous pikes (and a significant, but less famous, bowie knife). Joan Cashin surveys the similarly conflicting sectional perspectives and uses of "relics" from the American Revolution. Lisa Brady and Timothy Silver make the case that the Antietam battlefield itself, and the landscape and the environment generally, represents a kind of material culture. Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray explore the meanings that soldiers and their families bestowed upon books that stopped bullets and shell fragments. Earl Hess asks us to consider the cultural importance to soldiers of the weapons that fired those bullets and shells. Robert D. Hicks probes in detail mid-nineteenth-century vaccination practices and the Confederacy's reaction to a wartime smallpox outbreak to show how human matter qualifies as a form of material culture. Sarah Jones Weicksel uses photographs and descriptions to analyze the material culture of refugee camps and the divergent understandings of it. Victoria Ott argues that the material culture of white non-elite Alabama households helps us understand the patterns of support for and dissent from the Confederate government. Peter Carmichael posits that Confederate and Federal soldiers collected and saved artifacts as enduring relics of defeat or symbols of triumph, not just for idle nostalgia. Lastly, Yael Sternhell suggests that Jefferson Davis's years-long effort to recover clothing and papers taken from him upon his May 1865 capture brought home to him in very personal terms the meaning of defeat.

Beyond the main points of their chapters, the essayists seek to demonstrate the value of applying material culture studies to Civil War history. Judging by the number of textual and endnote ref-

erences to it, Michael DeGruccio's essay in the 2011 collection ***Weirding the War*** provides the kind of clarion call for material culture studies that Maris Vinovskis's 1989 ***Journal of American History*** article, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War?" did for social history. Accordingly, editor Cashin and the essayists assiduously lay a historiographical foundation for their work. The touchstones include the familiar classics by Clifford Geertz, Henry Glassie, and James Deetz and more recent cornerstones of the literature. Cashin's introduction and Brady and Silver's essay naturally cite the literature of environmental history. Earl Hess's essay draws on an impressive body of international scholarship about the material culture of weapons.

Not surprisingly, editor and essayists trumpet the potential value of material culture studies. "The study of material culture can give us new perspectives on a number of ongoing historical debates," Cashin argues, such as "the nature of the common soldier's experience" and "long-running debates about the strength of popular allegiance to the Confederacy and the related question of persisting support for the Union within the South" (p. 5). In his essay, Jason Phillips states that broadening our study beyond manuscripts in archives shows us "how the power of possessions, particularly weapons, can goad people into action and make history" (p. 29). Peter Carmichael argues that Confederate trophies taken at the end of the war were not merely idle souvenirs, but objects that "could shape behavior, filter perceptions, and serve as conductors of action" (p. 218).

It is easy to get caught up in the excitement of the prospect for new insights into Civil War history, not to mention the new opportunities for articles, books, and dissertations. But, upon closer—and skeptical—inspection, how many truly new and important insights do these essays yield?

Does a study showing how proslavery forces and abolitionists perceived and exploited for propaganda purposes the weapons manufactured for John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry reveal anything fundamentally new about the dynamics of antebellum politics? Would it not be reasonable to expect that Northerners and Southerners would similarly perceive and portray the material culture of the founding fathers through sectional and ideological prisms (as other studies have shown they did for the image of George Washington, for example)?[1] Were we not aware already that freedmen and Northern humanitarian organizations held different perceptions of African American family and morality? Although environmental historians have given us new insights about the causal importance of microbes and specific soils and weather patterns on Civil War campaigns and battles, the importance of a battlefield's terrain has long been the stuff of Center for Military History staff ride studies (which, incidentally, do not appear in the endnotes for Brady and Silver's essay).[2] The contrast between Jefferson Davis's unyielding belief in the righteousness of his actions and the humiliation and emasculation he suffered at the end of the war, along with his postwar quest for vindication, is a staple of his biography, even without a study of his effort to recover the clothes and documents that could aid that vindication.

Admittedly, these thumbnail critiques are inherently oversimplified generalizations about nuanced essays, but I offer them to suggest that the essays' essential points seem more self-evident than profound. Material culture contributes new evidence to discussions we are already having rather than generating new discussions.

My inchoate sense of being underwhelmed derives from my own innate and increasingly firm belief that ideas shape our understanding of objects, not vice versa, and that the essays seem to support that perspective even when they argue for objects' causal role. In praising DeGruccio's *Weirding* essay and other recent works, Peter Carmichael asserts that "the logical outcome of their fine scholarship calls into question the pri-

macy of ideas as the dominant source of motivation. Rather, things themselves have agency, and they possess an intrinsic power to shape behavior, as is evident in the ways that Union and Confederate soldiers responded to the outcome of Appomattox." In the subsequent paragraph, Carmichael notes how "both sides collected objects to validate their military service and the political cause for which they had fought" (p. 199). The beliefs, perceptions, and feelings that he enumerates—suffering, sacrifice, shame, and pride—were powerful motivating and shaping forces even without relics and trophies to embody them.

The other essays similarly rely on documentary sources and ideas to give them any real significance or context and make them worth studying. Weicksel's study of refugee camps relies explicitly on "textual accounts" because there is so little surviving material culture evidence (pp. 152-53). Victoria Ott deals less with specific examples of material culture than with material objects in the abstract as indices of wealth and of engagement or disengagement with the Confederate cause. "Through the home and the material objects within it," Ott concludes, "Alabama's common whites found agency in the Civil War experience by creating a supportive, maternal female identity and a protective, paternal male identity" (p. 192). Her essay dwells far more on those concepts than it draws from an admittedly small sample of evidence about common Alabamians' material culture. Earl Hess is careful to stay within his evidence and, in the course of exploring the multifaceted interrelationships between soldiers and their weapons, underscores how men adapted to their weapons and how they adapted their weapons to their own cultural beliefs and experiences.

The Zborays "examine bullet-in-the-book episodes for the light they shed upon how and why books were refashioned into talismans against harm by soldiers, upon the loved ones who gave them books, and upon those who wrote about these incidents" (p. 76). Their essay reveals the indispensable importance of accompanying written histories to give meaning to those artifacts. The essay also begs an obvious comparison and contrast between books (especially religious books) as shields and other struck objects. As they note (also on p. 76), bullet-struck books typically have been the province of collectors and hobbyists, the types of people whom Michael DeGruccio chides academic historians for shunning. Indeed, the flagship popular magazine ***Civil War Times*** ran a short-lived regular feature entitled "Struck," about bullet-struck objects, including books, but also canteens and other equipage. My museum's collections also have pieces of trees and other objects that soldiers donated because they saved their lives. The most storied struck object is the bent gold coin ("my life preserver") that Lt. George Dixon saved (and engraved) from the battle of Shiloh, salvaged recently from the wreckage of his coffin, the submarine ***H. L. Hunley.*** How do these objects and the testimonials accompanying them affect the Zborays' analysis of bullet-struck (religious) books?

Once again, I am in danger of misrepresenting the essays, which do not argue explicitly and consistently for the primacy of objects over the ideas that they convey. But, by trying to establish the value of the material approach, they suggest that the study of objects reveals things that we would not know or consider otherwise. I am not sure that is true.

"Material objects lie at the crux of understanding individual and social relationships in every culture," editor Cashin explains in her introduction, "and nineteenth-century Americans created, used, preserved, revered, exploited, discarded, mocked, and destroyed objects for a host of reasons. By so doing, they made manifest some of their most significant beliefs about themselves, their communities, and their country, in peacetime and war" (pp. 8-9). In her essay, Cashin concludes that the collection of relics from the Revo-

lution "demonstrates yet again how much human beings have coveted relics, how much they have enjoyed them, and how insistently they have used them to express their political beliefs, as they perceive them anew in new contexts" (pp. 47-48).

That objects offer different ways of getting at ideas and themes of the American Civil War or any era of history is a reasonable and compelling case for the value of this collection. Educators will welcome a more sensory, three-dimensional approach to teaching their subject. Historians and curators who work with the objects will appreciate thoughtful essays that add context to their collections. Less compelling to me are arguments that objects actively shaped behavior and goaded people into action. If the problem lies with me, not the scholarship, then I hope that my critique will prompt these and other scholars to sharpen their presentation and arguments.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Anne Sarah Rubin, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861-1868* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); and Richard B. McCaslin, *Lee in the Shadow of Washington* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

[2]. See, for example, Timothy Silver and Judkin Browning, "Nature and Human Nature: Environmental Influences in the Union's Failed Peninsula Campaign, 1862," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 3 (2018):388-415; and Kathryn Shively Meier, *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 186 Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).