



Norman K. Risjord. *The Civil War Generation*. New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002. x + 371 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-2169-8; \$96.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-2168-1.

Reviewed by W. Wayne Smith (Department of History, University of Maryland, University College)

Published on H-CivWar (May, 2003)

## Generational History and the Civil War

### Generational History and the Civil War

In his new book, Norman Risjord, respected nineteenth-century America historian, presents what he sees as the “Civil War generation.” He defines that generation as those people living in the 1850s to 1870s. His book presents what he regards as representative Americans of that time. However, relying on generational history as a method and identifying a specific Civil War generation are two conceptual problems that Risjord has not fully addressed in this book.

Tom Brokaw reinforced the concept of generational history with his popular book *The Greatest Generation*. The notion of a generation is that it is a group of people, generally in a twenty-year cohort, who live and experience the same moments. They are theoretically self-contained and insulated. What precedes and succeeds them are other generations, also self-contained to their times.

Yet we know that life and history are seamless. One can rarely tear history on a perforated line and designate a fault line in the experience of human history. (We as historians are doing it all the time; but we readily concede the parameters of a historical period are for convenience.) People move beyond single experiences or great events. Other features of our life cycle affect and change us. We are constantly being reshaped and, in time, it is difficult to pin us to a particular time. The self-contained generation has a variety of experiences. Groups of people overlap, as young lovers become parents, see their parents die, grow older, and delightedly welcome a fourth generation in their life, the grandchildren. Consequently, the historian has problems with the concept of a generation as a historical tool.

By using the generational concept, Risjord wants to consider the Civil War as both an event and a period of time. Yet it was only a four-year period (or sixteen years, if you include Reconstruction). For instance, Risjord

chooses Stephen A. Douglas as his first example, obviously to examine the roots of the war. Douglas, however, died in June 1861. Does he really belong to the Civil War generation?

Risjord also chooses a number of people who lived during the 1860s, but were not severely affected by the Civil War. So is this his effort to present the Civil War as a time, and the idea that these people embody commercial and geographic expansion of the mid-nineteenth century? Cornelius Vanderbilt, for example, had already made his fortune by the 1860s. While Vanderbilt profited from the war by shipping goods and soldiers, one is not convinced that the war made Vanderbilt. Also, consider Crazy Horse. He and “a way of life gone” came not as a feature of the Civil War, but of events that occurred after and separately from the war. Similarly, John Wesley Powell is another representative who fought in the war and suffered an amputation of his right forearm. However, Risjord devotes only six sentences to Powell’s wartime career. Instead, the bulk of the chapter delves into his postwar career in the exploration of the Colorado River.

When Risjord stays his course by focusing on the participants in the war, his book is on solid ground. One might quibble with his choice of military representatives, e.g., Stonewall Jackson, who did not live through the war. His selection of James Anderson, a Wisconsin enlistee, is the most enjoyable chapter and truly illustrates Risjord’s thesis. The book presents William H. Seward, Judah P. Benjamin, Thaddeus Stevens, and Robert Smalls as the wartime politicians; but the choice ignores the antiwar conservatives like Clement Vallandigham. And he places Clara Barton in the chapter entitled “On the Perimeter of the War,” but she was as much a central figure as the fighters.

Finally, one has to ask who is the audience for which this book is written? It presents no new interpretation of the Civil War and only gives us one new person, the

young soldier, James Anderson. So the book does not meet the claim of a new thesis. Nor does the book seem to reach for Roundtable participants who prefer generals and battles. It is unlikely that the book will attract the attention of the general reading public, which prefers new stories or insights. Risjord is probably reaching for the textbook market; indeed, one can see this book as a useful supplement to a course in American history. The book offers brief, up-to-date biographies that provide students an opportunity to meet historical participants not usually found in a textbook. Additionally, the teacher could use the book to raise the issue of "historical generations." So for history and historical theory, the book could enhance

a survey course.

Historians might find some of the short biographies useful and entertaining. This reviewer, for example, had not read a biography of Harriet Tubman or tried to unravel the complex financial schemes of Cornelius Vanderbilt. Risjord draws his portraits and stories entirely from secondary sources and previous biographies of the subjects. The suggested bibliography for each chapter is up-to-date with biographies written as recently as 2001, so it is a useful reference to guide readers to sources with more depth than provided here. On John Wesley Powell, however, can anyone really top Wallace Stegner's *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*?

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

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** W. Wayne Smith. Review of Risjord, Norman K., *The Civil War Generation*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2003.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7592>

Copyright © 2003 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](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).