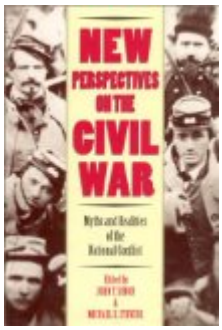
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Y. Simon, Michael E. Stevens, eds.. *New Perspectives on the Civil War: Myths and Realities of the National Conflict.* Madison, Wi.: Madison House, 1998. xiv + 172 pp. $27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-945612-62-9.



Reviewed by Mark Peel

Published on H-CivWar (July, 2003)

A "Popular" Civil War?

The essays in this collection address a very important concern: how to write the history of events that, even more than most, are being constantly re-invented, re-imagined, and re-enacted. Produced for a conference, the essays aim to "confront some of the conventional wisdom and myths that have developed" (p. xi) about the Civil War and address the concern that serious interpretations are obscured by the war's "recreational and entertainment aspects" (p. x). To that end, the authors have chosen to focus upon some of the narratives or subjects with which "ordinary" readers and re-enactors might be most concerned. While the collection has the unevenness that characterizes all such endeavors, the quality of the individual essays makes this an important addition to the historical scholarship.

Mark Neely, for instance, resumes his campaign against the notion that this was a "total war." He adds even more weight to his earlier, convincing arguments and shows us that tactics which could be directed against Native Americans in the 1860s and 1870s could not yet be aimed at "civilized belligerents," such as white men and women.[1] Neely also traces the history of the "total war" thesis, demonstrating in a particularly effective way how histories written about a past are always written in a present. Alan Nolan's claim that legends of Lee "defeat the efforts of today's historians" (p. 38) is perhaps a little too bleak, and his plea for an end to glorification is almost plaintive, but his focus upon the continuing power and key elements of the "Lost Cause" is a welcome reflection upon this important issue. John Simon, James Robertson, and Gary Gallagher contribute interesting chapters on Ulysses S. Grant, Stonewall Jackson, and Jubal Early. Simon focuses on contingency and context, while Gallagher deploys Early in a particularly interesting demonstration of continuities across accepted divides of time and place. Robertson's insightful analysis of Jackson's "charisma" is only slightly sidetracked by his rather dyspeptic assaults on unnamed others who "worship 'historical revisionism'" (p. 73). The volume is completed by Joseph Glatthaar's admirably compressed canvas of the crucial themes and issues containded in the histories of the war's ordinary soldiers, and by Ervin Jordan's interest-

ing if rather idiosyncratic treatment of Afro-Virginians, in which an assembling of "achievements" and anecdotes does not quite fulfill his desire to overcome America's "cultural amnesia" about "the struggles and sacrifices of African-American soldiers and civilians" (p. 150).

The weight of an edited collection is often less than the sum of its parts, and so it is here. In this case, this is largely a matter of the supporting infrastructure. The contributors' efforts would have been better rewarded by a more thorough introduction to key dilemmas in historical writing about the Civil War, for instance. Even more, while each work in the collection expresses some uneasiness about American Civil War stories, an antidote is harder to find. There are glimpses, usually along the lines that historians must neither bear false witness nor make the people of the past say things they could not have said or believe only the things we want them to believe. Some chapter writers make important points about the ways in which historians, by correcting and connecting each other's work, contribute to a broader common knowledge about the war. But in the absence of a reflective conclusion, it is difficult to see how we are to move forward.

Certainly, few of us who write and teach in the area of Civil War America would quarrel with the editors' intention to seek out and inform a "popular" audience. As a foreigner writing and teaching those histories, I am no less interested in the issues they raise; Americans are not alone in debating particular and preferred versions of the past or the place of war stories in national imaginings. Yet what remains unclear in this volume, as a fully formed question let alone a solution, is what writing for a "popular" audience actually means. Does it mean adopting a particular style, or a way of writing that resonates better with popular language? Does it mean responding to a popular desire to see heroes and villains among the people of the past, or exploring well-memoired personalities rather than ordinary folk who have not left much of anything behind? Or does it mean selecting subjects and themes that clearly interest that popular audience, which, on the evidence of this collection, will mean new biographies of military leaders and ever more diary-detailed stories about the lives and fortunes of male soldiers?

I hasten to add that I intend no slight to either genre: some of the finest writing and the most challenging interpretations within Civil War historical scholarship deal with these subjects. But should not writing to and for a popular audience also seek to do something else, perhaps highlighting the people who do not speak so loudly or the topics that are not so clearly popular? In a way, this collection of new perspectives really does not seem very new at all. This is not because the individual contributions are in any way below par; the thinnest of them would make a useful introductory essay for students, and the best of them would hold a place in any collection of Civil War writing. But the volume as a whole seems to have raised and then sidestepped a crucial issue: what features of the common knowledge about the Civil War need to be challenged, and how? By focusing on the difference between "myths" and "realities," the editors make the question too simple, I think. True, the problem is partly one of accuracy, of arming history against myth and legend. But it is also something more than that. To use the term developed by Jim Cullen, there is also a problem with a "majoritarian" form of history writing--in which there may be no actual untruths--that caters to those Americans (or Australians, for that matter) who want to read all about people like themselves, their origins, their heroic glories, and their tragedies, all the while ignoring other people's pasts.[2] Inadequate popular histories are not limited to those that do not tell the truth. They also include those that reconcile the powerful, the dominant, and the "normal" to their pasts by swamping the pasts of others and ignoring the truths they tell. Perhaps, as Cullen argued, we need to think about ways of confronting such his-

tories more directly, without dismissing their significance. These essays make gestures in that direction and generate opportunities for debate. By any measure, too, these are difficult questions and far too large for any one collection to solve. But this particular attempt to bring together new perspectives is, in my view, somewhat diminished by shying away from them.

Notes

[1]. Mark E. Neely, Jr., "Was the Civil War a Total War?" *Civil War History* 37 (1991).

[2]. Jim Cullen, *The Civil War in Popular Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), p. 199.