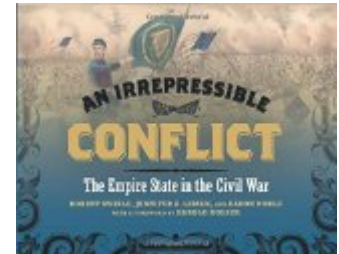


Robert Weible, Jennifer A. Lemak, Aaron Noble. *An Irrepressible Conflict: The Empire State in the Civil War.* Excelsior Editions Series. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014. Illustrations. 268 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4384-5348-4.



Reviewed by Mike Pospishil

Published on H-War (October, 2015)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

An Irrepressible Conflict: The Empire State in the Civil War is a companion to the award-winning exhibition of the same name that ran for nineteen months ending in March 2014 at the New York State Museum. The handsome full-size volume includes 262 pages of glossy color prints showcasing over five hundred objects housed in museums and historical societies throughout the state. Abraham Lincoln's draft of the Emancipation Proclamation—held by the New York State Library—serves as the keystone of the book. The authors situate New York's reception of the monumental document amid rapid antebellum social change and the ongoing efforts for racial equality that stretched from Reconstruction through the civil rights movement.

The book is organized into three chapters authored by a trio of scholars specializing in nineteenth-century New York: Robert Weible, Jennifer A. Lemak, and Aaron Noble. The pages also include a foreword by Harold Holzer, as well as an introduction, index, and message from the state museum director. The team avoids engaging with historiographical controversy and sticks closely to

an interpretation of the Civil War as a social upheaval and the main event in the longer struggle for racial equality in the United States. For scholars of the war, the book offers fresh if brief glimpses of the contributions of several of New York's regiments as well as some of the state's lesser-known wartime figures. For newcomers to the role of New Yorkers in the war, the book serves as an engaging introduction loaded with compelling photos of a rich array of material culture.

In "Antebellum New York," Lemak gives a thematic overview of state history up to the fateful election of 1860. She contextualizes Lincoln's rise within the ranks of the Republican Party by offering material culture snapshots highlighting the history of slavery in New York, the Transportation Revolution, the Age of Reform, and antebellum politics leading up to the rise of the Republican Party in the 1850s and Lincoln's subsequent election. The cultural interplay between city and country in the evolution of New York's reform movements lays just beneath the surface of Lemak's chapter. She ably highlights some of the issues that divided upstate and downstate by the

1850s, including abolition, temperance, and immigration.

Noble's chapter, "The Civil War, 1861-1865," comprises the bulk of the book. His theme is "blood and treasure": a reference to the fact that in terms of human lives and material resources New York contributed more to the war effort than any other state. The chapter is organized both thematically and chronologically and is an excellent overview of the progression of the war. Noble identifies several major divisions going into the war: immigrant/native-born, abolitionist/anti-abolitionist, Republican/Democrat, and rich/poor. In recognizing class, he adds a level of complexity to New York society largely skipped over by Lemak. Included among the sections that cover the standard military and political milestones of the war is New York's financial and industrial might: including an extended two-page treatment of the state firearms industry—although one can contest Noble's claim that the state's gunsmiths dominated the industry at mid-century. Of interest are several portraits of New York's foreign-born soldiers: an important recognition of the fact that 30 percent of the state's soldiers were immigrants, including forty-two thousand Irish and several ranking veterans of the European revolutions of 1848.

The concluding chapter, "Reconstruction and Legacy," is the least effective of the book as it is overly ambitious in its scope. Lemak and Weible attempt to squeeze Reconstruction, the Jim Crow Era, and the civil rights movement into a single narrative thread stressing the legacy of the war as a struggle for racial equality. While they offer intriguing glimpses into the material culture of New Yorkers struggling to find meaning in the aftermath of war—for example, a wheelchair from the state Soldiers' and Sailors' Home in Bath, Steuben County—the chapter does little justice to the tumultuous century following the war or the historiographical contest over the war's legacy.

By design, the work is more a collector's piece than a scholarly contribution, but a collector's piece anyone with a sense of pride in the Empire State will surely appreciate. This collection serves as a testament to the value of material culture in telling a narrative, and the value of including color photographs in works of history. However, as an unfortunate trade-off, the book is light on interpretive text and occasionally fails altogether to contextualize seemingly compelling objects. For example, the inclusion of several swords belonging to prominent military leaders leaves one wondering whether the ancient weapon was of practical or symbolic significance in what is portrayed throughout as an industrialized war. More troublesome is the heavy reliance on representations of wartime society from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* without an effort to contextualize the magazine in the nation's exploding print culture scene.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Mike Pospishil. Review of Weible, Robert; Lemak, Jennifer A.; Noble, Aaron. *An Irrepressible Conflict: The Empire State in the Civil War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44221>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.