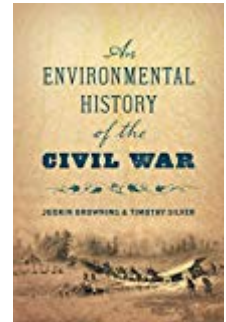


Judkin Browning, Timothy Silver. *An Environmental History of the Civil War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 272 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-5538-3.



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A decade ago, the landscape of Civil War environmental history—the study of how the natural world shaped the conflict and how, in turn, the conflict left its mark upon nature—was largely featureless. Just a few works rose up from its horizon: Lisa Brady’s *War Upon the Land*, Megan Kate Nelson’s *Ruin Nation*, Andrew McIlwaine Bell’s *Mosquito Soldiers*, Jim Downs’s *Sick from Freedom*, and shorter pieces by Mark Fiege and Ted Steinberg.[1] A few older works with proto-environmental leanings could be laid alongside them, but not many; the entire historiography of the field might have fit on a single bookshelf with room to spare. But the seeds these authors planted have allowed us to start bringing in a good harvest, with recent books by Kathryn Shively Meier, Adam Wesley Dean, Matthew Stith, Erin Stewart Mauldin, and Kenneth Noe (as well as my own edited volume from 2015), not to mention a larder full of book chapters, articles, conference papers, and the like.[2] But none of the aforementioned works tackle the environmental history of the war as a whole, for what are likely obvious reasons of scale

and complexity. It is to Judkin Browning and Timothy Silver’s credit that they have chosen to be the first to take on this daunting mission and have executed it so well. *An Environmental History of the Civil War* is not *the* environmental history of the war—if such a thing is possible—but as the first major attempt at a holistic account of the conflict’s impact on the natural world and vice versa, it is impressive.

An Environmental History of the Civil War unfolds along lines both chronological and thematic. Its opening chapter, for instance, resides temporally in 1861 but also focuses on “sickness,” mainly in the form of contagious disease. The next five chapters take the reader through to Appomattox and into Reconstruction via a similar formula, with themes including “weather” (winter 1861-fall 1862), “food” (fall 1862-summer 1863), “animals” (summer 1863-spring 1864), “death and disability” (spring 1864-fall 1864), and “terrain” (fall 1864-spring 1865). But the themes are not as distinct as the chronological distinctions might suggest. It is a cardinal rule in ecology that all things are connec-

ted, and so it is here, too. From the beginning, Browning and Silver are aware of the synergy among their subjects. The illnesses of chapter 1 interact with the weather and climate of chapter 2, which are in turn an important factor for chapter 3's agriculture, and so on, with the relationships shifting over time according to the fortunes of war and the vagaries of nature.

The insights that emerge from such an approach range from the self-evident to the profound. Take the weather, for instance. It is not a revelation to argue that fighting outside in the rain, cold, mud, dust, heat and drought made for a miserable experience. That such an experience, augmented by inadequate food or tainted water, in turn led to widespread disease and death is not a surprise, either. But if Civil War environmental history were merely a restatement of the obvious, it would not be of much use. Browning and Silver certainly touch on the obvious subjects. But, deeply familiar with the main ideas of both environmental and "standard" Civil War histories, they soon proceed well beyond them.

There are many good examples. Taking a cue from the Columbian Exchange, for instance, Browning and Silver argue that the rural isolation in which many soldiers grew up rendered them acutely vulnerable to disease once they were mustered into service. Largely innocent of the density-dependent diseases found in urban areas and weakened by hard training, harsh weather, bad diet, and bad hygiene, they proceeded to fall in stunningly large numbers. In other words, the population geography of antebellum America was a key factor in the impact of disease once war came. And the war, in turn, fostered a "new and distinct pattern of microbial exchange" as soldiers marched into new regions and environments and then back again (p. 37). In another provocative example, the authors utilize the one-two punch of weather and disease to partially rehabilitate George McClellan's reputation for spectacular failure in the Peninsula campaign of 1862. Whatever

his weaknesses of command, they argue, McClellan also faced very real problems in illness, heat, humidity, and massive flooding. It is impossible, they write, "to divorce McClellan's actions from the natural environment in which they occurred" (p. 66).

And humans were not the only combatants to suffer from illness and the elements. One of the book's most interesting aspects is its extended discussion of livestock. Like humans, legions of horses and mules marched off into the ranks, where they were indispensable for pulling supply wagons, hauling artillery pieces, and carrying officers and cavalry. And as with humans, moving from a life of rural isolation to close quarters and brutal work brought epidemic diseases like glanders, which devastated equine populations on both sides. Similarly, hog cholera slashed the pig population of the South, a situation made worse by a severe lack of salt for preserving pork (a phenomenon first noted by Ella Lonn back in 1933).[3] Nor were crops immune, as diseases like stem rust accompanied extremes of rain and drought to devastate Virginia wheat in 1862, a blow to both humans and livestock alike. Indeed, even when they were healthy, horses and mules were voracious consumers of food and water, not to mention prodigious producers of urine and excrement. Impressment, foraging, and stealing in order to feed soldiers are familiar subjects to Civil War historians, but the needs of the armies' four-footed legions are less so. Following the lead of Megan Kate Nelson, Joan Cashin, and Erin Mauldin, Browning and Silver highlight the constant quest to keep the animals fed. Declining pork supplies had already "helped dictate" Confederate planning by the time Robert E. Lee invaded Pennsylvania in summer 1863, a move inspired as much by a crying need for calories as it was by strategy or politics (p. 124). The North, meanwhile, found itself blessed with copious amounts of livestock, massive and increasingly mechanized harvests, and an expanding supply of rich and well-tended glacial soil on which to

support them, a not-inconsiderable advantage as the war dragged on.

Indeed, another strength of *An Environmental History of the Civil War* is Browning and Silver's attentiveness beyond the battlefield. Long after the guns fell silent at Antietam, for example, the ecological effects of the battle lingered on. As on other bivouacs and battlefields, the stink of urine and excrement, garbage, spilled blood, and rotting flesh both human and equine turned stomachs for weeks afterward (the sheer amount of dead horseflesh alone could be staggering). But worse was the deprivation. The contesting armies—120,000 troops in all—consumed local resources like twin black holes, especially Lee's army, whose malnutrition was so acute they had sickened themselves gorging on unripe corn before the battle. There was precious little left for locals afterward. "With no meat in the smokehouse, no corn in the crib, no crop to sell, and no government assistance to help them," Browning and Silver write, "Sharpsburg's civilians faced ruin." Bankruptcy and dependency on charity loomed. "Such was the aftermath of nearly every major battle of the war" (p. 80).

Meanwhile, short-term local weather events might have impacted specific battles and campaigns, for instance, but Browning and Silver note that longer-term global ones like ENSO oscillations were at least as important. In 1862 California suffered dramatically from an ENSO-related "atmospheric river" that brought tremendous ruin to cropland, for example, and high water on the Mississippi's tributaries allowed Union gunboats to sail almost literally up to Ft. Henry and force its surrender (p. 42). Meanwhile much of the Confederacy suffered through historic drought that put it at further agricultural disadvantage compared to the prodigious North. Climatology is not destiny, to turn the famous phrase, but as Kenneth Noe does in his recent *The Howling Storm: Weather, Climate, and the American Civil War* (2020), Browning and Silver remind us that local events often hinged on global ones.

We could go on, but suffice it to say that *An Environmental History of the Civil War* is full of similar insights. It does, however, flag a bit as it crosses the finish line. The epilogue discusses the postwar legacy of the war's massive ecological changes, particularly the damage done to the South's agriculture and the ways in which that damage fell especially hard on freedmen. It also touches on the emergence, after the war, of the national park idea as a response to the war's destruction. But the discussions feel just a tad too brief after the richness of the previous chapters. In the authors' defense, the war's ecological legacy was likely as long and complicated as its political one. Entire books in the vein of Erin Mauldin's *Unredeemed Land* will be written to analyze it, and it is difficult to ask Browning and Silver to, in essence, write one for their last chapter.

Indeed, one of the most useful aspects of this book is that it should inspire a raft of environmental analyses both large and small. Deep explorations of other battlefields, à la Browning and Silver's Antietam, will no doubt yield more insights into the war's long-term ecological effects. Their emphasis on mobilization and agriculture promises to inspire a wealth of studies of how provisioning the war altered local and regional ecology for decades after. And the links between the war and Progressive conservation will likely be shown to run far deeper than a few national parks. The prospects for the future of Civil War environmental history are exciting.

Notes

[1]. Lisa Brady, *War Upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern landscapes During the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Andrew McIlwaine Bell, *Mosquito Soldiers: Malaria, Yellow Fever, and the Course of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); Jim Downs, *Sick from Free-*

dom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Mark Fiege, "The Nature of Gettysburg," in *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 199-227; Ted Steinberg, "The Great Food Fight," in *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 76-85.

[2]. Kathryn Shively Meier, *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Adam Wesley Dean, *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Matthew M. Stith, *Extreme Civil War: Guerilla Warfare, Environment, and Race on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016); Erin Stewart Mauldin, *Unredeemed Land: An Environmental History of Civil War and Emancipation in the Cotton South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Kenneth Noe, *The Howling Storm: Weather, Climate and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020); Brian Allen Drake, ed., *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

[3]. Ella Lonn, *Salt as a Factor in the Confederacy* (New York: Walter Neale, 1933).

Editor's note: The original version of this review stated that Union gunboats were able to force the surrender of Ft. Donelson thanks to high water on the Mississippi River; the review has been corrected to reflect that the fort under discussion was Ft. Henry.

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

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