Civil War Historiography

There are many reasons that the American Civil War has attracted substantial and sustained popular and academic attention, but at the heart of any explanation must be the multitude of voices. In many respects, the war gave voice to all sorts of Americans, everyone from top military commanders planning strategy to illiterate civilians scrawling an "X" onto petitions addressed to public officials. In turn, this has produced a cacophony of warring tongues and pens arguing over the causes, course, and consequences of this central event in American history.

Causes of the War

Traditional approaches to the studying the Civil War have often been narrowly political and military though in recent years social historians have announced with great fanfare that they have rediscovered the Civil War. The opening salvo was fired in an influential collection of essays: Maris A. Vinovskis, ed., Toward a Social History of the American Civil War: Explanatory Essays (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Ironically on the causes of the war itself, the most important works are quite traditional in both content and interpretation. The standard book on the coming of the war is still David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis: 1848-1861 (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). Historians have not generally embraced Potter's mildly revisionist interpretation, but no subsequent work has matched his magisterial sweep or penetrating analysis. Potter dealt with political maneuvering more than political ideas, but Eric Foner emphasized ideology in his outstanding study of the Republican party, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). A work that sheds great light on the whole question of slavery in the national territories is Michael A. Morrison, Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Two useful anthologies that cover the major schools of interpretation are Kenneth M. Stampp, ed. The Causes of the Civil War (New York: Touchstone, 1991) and Gabor S. Boritt, ed., Why the Civil War Came (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Recent historians of the antebellum South have emphasized the diversity and to some extent the disunity of the region. This is especially true in the first volume of William W. Freehling's long-awaited study: The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Anyone who still believes that slavery was not central to the coming of the Civil War should study Charles B. Dew's tightly-focused monograph Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001). A very readable and detailed account of the Sumter crisis is Maury Klein, Days of Defiance: Sumter, Secession, and the Coming of the Civil War (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).
The Confederacy


Consequences of the War


Military History of the War--Introduction

In contradictory and complex ways, the military history of the Civil War has been both shaped and bypassed by the newer approaches to studying the Civil War. Students of strategy, operations, and tactics have often plowed very traditional ground have sometimes been more receptive to new approaches than social historians have been to studying military topics. Even before the Civil War ended, the military history of the conflict was being written, and the outpouring of books, articles, and ephemera has never stopped. For the war in general, the place to begin is Steven E. Woodworth, The American Civil War: A Handbook of Literature and Research (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996) To select the most important and most readable works from such a vast literature is a daunting task. Of enormous help in sorting through a mass of material is David Eicher's careful evaluation of 1100 volumes in The Civil War in Books: An Analytical Bibliography (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). A recent collection of historiographical essays—including several dealing with military subjects—assesses the current state of the field: James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper, Jr., ed. Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998). For military studies in particular, including both primary and secondary works, there is the invaluable (albeit badly in need of updating) C. E. Dornbusch, Military Bibliography of the Civil War (4 vols.; New York and Dayton, Oh.: New York Public Library and Morningside: 1961-1987). Another older but very useful and annotated compilation is Allan Nevins, James I. Robertson, Jr., and Bell I. Wiley, Civil War Books: A Critical Bibliography (2 vols.; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967-69). Anyone interested in the perspective of participants should consult Garold L. Cole's excellent compendia Civil War Eyewitnesses: An Annotated Bibliography of Books and Articles, 1955-1986 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1986); Civil War Eyewitnesses: An Annotated Bibliography of Books and Articles, 1986-1996 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).


**Military Strategy**


**General Studies**


The Confederate commander-in-chief has long attracted biographical interest with decidedly mixed results. A work that is both sympathetic and comprehensive is William J. Cooper, Jr., *Jefferson Davis, American* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000). A more critical approach that focuses on the Civil War period and probes the Confederate president’s character flaws while acknowledging his virtues is William C. Davis, *Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991). Following the model set by T. Harry Williams, Steven E. Woodworth focuses on the relationships between Jefferson Davis and his generals in both theaters of the war. He criticizes both Davis and his generals for their failures to work together and their inability to develop a consensus on strategy in *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990) and *Davis and Lee at War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

How the war was fought has been the subject of several sweeping works. Edward Hagerman’s *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) offers invaluable information and insights about military organization, transportation, communication, and fortification. For the story of military intelligence based on neglected sources, see Edwin C. Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Intelligence in the Civil War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996) and William B. Feis, *Grant’s Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to the Appomattox* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002). That the rifled musket transformed tactics has long seemed self-evident, but Paddy Griffith raises questions on this score (not always persuasively) and offers cogent assessments of both sides’ use of infantry, artillery, cavalry and fortifications in *Battle Tactics of the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). The influence of West Point training and Mexican
War experience along with the impact of the Civil War's greater firepower are well covered in Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics on the Southern Heritage*. Their assertion that Confederates (in part because of their Celtic heritage) bled themselves to death in foolish front assaults has proved far more controversial than their astute tactical analysis. Many of the discussions on strategy and tactics by modern historians echo earlier assessments by European commentators whose important work is perceptively interpreted in Jay Luvaas, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War: The European Inheritance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

Bruce Catton's *Army of the Potomac* (3 vols.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1951-53) remains the best work on that subject-and one that has appealed strongly to several generations of readers. In an unfailingly interesting and thought-provoking study, *Our Masters the Rebels: A Speculation on Union Military Failure in the East, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), Michael C. C. Adams argues that until Ulysses S. Grant came east, the Confederates largely enjoyed psychological ascendancy over Federal generals and soldiers alike. Union armies in the West have suffered from considerable neglect. A recent book that fills an important gap for the early phases of the war is Gerald J. Prokopowicz, *All for the Regiment: The Army of the Ohio, 1861-1862* (Chapel Hill: University of the North Carolina Press, 2001). In *The Union Cavalry in the Civil War* (3 vols.; Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1979-1985), Stephen Starr presents a very detailed and solid treatment of that arm of service in all theaters.

Campaigns and Battles


There are three superb studies of important eastern theater campaigns. Though often neglected by historians, the second Battle of Bull Run finally receives its deserved attention in John J. Hennessy's masterful, *Return to Bull Run: The Campaign and Battle of Second Manassas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993). Hennessy tells a complex tale with remarkable lucidity and clarity. Stephen Sears's excellent *Landscape
Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1983) showed how deep research, just the right combination of analysis and detail, and steady attention to a campaign's political context could produce a model campaign book. Sears later wrote an equally valuable study of Stonewall Jackson's final campaign: Chancellorsville (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

More traditional and well-done campaign studies have continued to appear even as some historians have tried to expand the scope of such work. For an example of the former, see Francis Augustin O'Reilly, The Fredericksburg Campaign: Winter War on the Rappahannock (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003) and for an example of the latter, see George C. Rable, Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg! (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). A fine brief study that fully explains the importance of a vital campaign in a broad context is James M. McPherson, Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

One enters the deep thicket of seemingly endless studies of Gettysburg with some trepidation. The standard single-volume account remains Edwin B. Coddington, The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), a wonderfully evenhanded book that covers the major controversies and a host of other important topics. Stephen Sears, Gettysburg (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), however, will likely supplant Coddington for most general readers. For students of the battle who want even more detail from a historian thoroughly familiar with the ground and who weighs evidence carefully, see Harry W. Pfanz's three superb studies, Gettysburg—The First Day (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Gettysburg: The Second Day (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), and Harry W. Pfanz, Gettysburg-Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). The best modern study of Pickett's charge, based on extensive research that carefully analyzes the command decisions and tactical intricacies, is Earl J. Hess, Pickett's Charge: The Last Attack at Gettysburg (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Carol Reardon explores the meaning of this most famous assault of the Civil War for both participants and Americans generally in Pickett's Charge in History and Memory (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). In Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), Gary Wills argues that Lincoln used Gettysburg and his opportunity to speak at the cemetery dedication to essentially redefine the American experiment.

The titanic struggles between Grant and Lee have always attracted much historical and popular interest. Gordon Rhea is currently writing a monumental but very readable study of Grant's overland campaign that is now up to four volumes: The Battle of the Wilderness: May 5-6, 1864 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994); The Battles for Spotsylvania Court House and the Road to Yellow Tavern, May 7-12, 1864 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997); To the North Anna River: Grant and Lee, May 13-25, 1864 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); Cold Harbor: Grant and Lee, May 26-June 3, 1864 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002). Each of these books is characterized by impressive


Sherman's march to the Sea and his campaigns in the Carolinas have received considerable but not especially distinguished treatment. A notable exception is Lee Kennett's find blending of military and social history in *Marching Through Georgia: The Story of Soldiers and Civilians during Sherman's Campaign* (New York HarperCollins, 1995).
The University of Nebraska Press’s shorter and synthetic treatments in the "Great Campaigns of the Civil War Series" provide solid, compact, and interpretative studies. Gary W. Gallagher’s "Military Campaigns of the Civil War" series published by the University of North Carolina presents well-conceived essay collections containing much original scholarship on important eastern theater campaigns.

Biographies


It sometimes appears that almost every Confederate general officer, no matter how obscure, has a biographer. Fortunately, in this mass of literature there are several gems. The dashing and colorful P. G. T. Beauregard became the Confederacy's first notable military hero. Although acknowledging Beauregard's abilities, T. Harry Williams also probes the general's touchy egotism and penchant for elaborate and impractical strategic plans in *P. G. T. Beauregard: Napoleon in Gray* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954). Albert Sidney Johnston's death at Shiloh would always leave an assessment of his potential as an army commander open to speculation, Charles P. Roland's long standard biography, *Albert Sidney Johnston: Soldier of Three Republics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), remains indispensable for students

Although much has been written on Nathan Bedford Forrest and his campaigns, the only full account that gives balanced attention to the general's entire life is Brian Steel Wills, *A Battle from the State: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

Soldiers and Sailors


On naval warfare a popular narrative history that relies largely on published sources is Virgil Carrington Jones, *The Civil War at Sea* (3 vols.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960-62). By emphasizing how many ships were able to run the Union blockade, historians have often ignored the fall-off in southern trade, but there are nevertheless several standard operational histories. For a well-researched account of blockade running that argues for its great importance to the Confederate economy, see Stephen R. Wise, *Lifeline of the Confederacy: Blockade Running during the Civil War* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988). Robert M. Browning, Jr., carefully weighs the successes and failures of Union blockading squadrons in *From Cape Charles to Cape Fear: The North Atlantic Blockading Squadron during the Civil War* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993) and *Success Is All That Was Expected: The South Atlantic Blockading Squadron during the Civil War* (Washington: Brassey's, 2002). The only work to systematically treat joint Army-Navy operations is a highly interpretive study by Rowena Reed, *Combined Operations in the Civil War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1978).

Conclusion

The outpouring of literature on the Civil War ebbs and flows, but it is seldom a trickle because the popular appetite remains strong. Many readers prefer familiar stories told in familiar ways, but new approaches also occasionally attract interest. The whole field always seems to be teetering between exhaustion and renewal; much of the work remains stuck in familiar ruts and new work sometimes proves disappointing. But the sources are so extensive, rich, and varied, the period so filled with tension, drama, and the unexpected, that the promise of Civil War history always offers a glimmering hope of exciting new work to come.

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