

Civil War as Global Conflict: Transnational Meaning of the American Civil War

Review Number: 1687

Publish date: Thursday, 13 November, 2014

Editor: David T. Gleeson
Simon Lewis

ISBN: 9781611173260

Date of Publication: 2014

Price: £43.50

Pages: 312pp.

Publisher: University of South Carolina Press

Publisher url: <http://www.sc.edu/uscpress/books/2014/7325.html>

Place of Publication: Columbia, SC

Reviewer: William Coleman

Research into the global and transnational dimensions of the American Civil War is indisputably in vogue. Over the last half-decade or so a plethora of conferences, symposia, and discussion panels – many of which have matured into special issues and edited collections – have been convened to explore and encourage the internationalization of American history.⁽¹⁾ In some ways the success of these efforts is already evident. Graduate students now producing dissertations on any aspect of the American Civil War can hardly get away with failing to at least acknowledge the wider world in which it occurred. And thanks, in part, to what now amounts to more than two decades of calls for a new transnational history of the United States it's hard to imagine an academic in the field who remains unaware of the issues addressed by transnational and global histories of the conflict.⁽²⁾ Arguably, the grounds of scholarly debate now center less on whether it's necessary to place the American Civil War within a broader geographic framework than on exactly how and why it's best to do so. In short, it appears what was once an emerging trend towards a transnational history of the American Civil War is bearing some marks of scholarly consensus.

As yet, however, the American public hasn't matched the academy's enthusiasm for a more internationalized history of the American Civil War. There are all sorts of possible reasons for Americans to be reticent about embracing the Civil War as a global conflict but two are particularly worth highlighting. First, when coming to grips with what is supposedly a 'domestic' conflict it can be tempting to dismiss clever-sounding academic arguments about faraway places as secondary to the central narrative of events, to the real concerns of most American contemporaries, and to the actual causes and outcomes of the War itself. And second, attempts to integrate American history into a larger global or transnational history tend to implicitly undermine claims of American exceptionalism – an outcome that, generally speaking, academic historians may still be more comfortable with than the American public at large.

David T. Gleeson and Simon Lewis position their edited collection as a bridge to academic interest in a more globally framed history of the Civil War for public audiences who may be prone to approach the idea with caution. The volume is the product of a conference organized in 2011 by the Program in the Carolina Lowcountry & Atlantic World (CLAW) at the College of Charleston, whose purpose, in part, is to promote

public understanding by placing local histories in international contexts (p. 4). To this end, the collection aims to reach ‘beyond’ academic history to take on the ‘burden of social responsibility’ (p. 6). Accordingly, Gleeson and Lewis suggest in their introductory chapter that the significance of global and transnational histories of the Civil War should involve more than allusions to its academic utility. Instead, underpinning much of *The Civil War as Global Conflict* is a hope that greater public recognition of the Civil War’s global contexts and transnational meanings might amount to a civic good in itself – one that helps facilitate conversations about the conflict that avoid ‘pantomime-like North-South, black-white, blue-gray binaries’ (p. 5). It’s perhaps a peculiarly American-based justification for global history but it’s a principled one nonetheless, and it reflects the editors’ genuine desire to connect the results of historical inquiry to present concerns.

The substantive chapters of the collection divide into three sections. The first covers what Gleeson and Lewis refer to as ‘truly global overviews’ of the forces and attitudes that shaped life in the mid-19th century, the second explores specific transnational examples that confirm and complicate these global trends, and the third examines the international significance of particular ‘fields’ related to the American Civil War and its memory that range from international relations and antiracist ideology to nursing and popular culture (p. 6–7). The standard of scholarship on offer is exceptionally high: readable, thoroughly researched, and concise. Certain variations of style and focus emerge in consequence of the range of disciplines represented (and in some cases professions) but this does little to detract from the overall quality of work on display. All contributors have lived up to the goals of the editors in terms of presenting their work in an accessible form that speaks to those without a background in their specialty. And parochial debates are kept to a minimum. Nowhere in this collection, for instance, is there a clear dissection of the differences between, say, global, transnational, or international history. Such a taxonomic explication may have helped clarify the purpose of the collection (especially given the title refers to both a ‘global conflict’ and ‘transnational meanings’) but, equally, it would hardly have helped engage the mixed audience the editors seek to attract.

The opening section contains four essays that together integrate the American Civil War into a global web of contemporaneous forces and ideas. Here the authors tend to focus on questions of Civil War causation (or Southern secession) and use the global perspective to reconsider why slavery became a uniquely intractable problem for mid-19th-century Americans. Edward B. Rugemer’s chapter opens proceedings with a comparative analysis of the economics of slavery and abolitionism in the United States, Cuba, and Brazil, which argues that anti-democratic proclivities were common to pro-slavery advocates in all three nations but had a distinctively disruptive impact on an American political union where slavery was sectional and the abolitionist movement homegrown. Matthew Karp, in turn, explains the stridency of antebellum American slaveholders by way of their confidence in the rise of a new world empire based on the foundations of free trade and ‘coercive agriculture’ (p. 40). When southerners insisted on protecting slavery through passing the Fugitive Slave Law, the Gag Law, or the Ordinance of Secession, Karp explains, they did so not simply out of ‘domestic political anxieties’ but also out of a belief that their actions were in keeping with the vanguard of world opinion (p. 48).

Similarly, Hugh Dubrulle’s essay draws a fascinating comparison between British conceptions of African-Americans before and after the Civil War that works to situate Americans of the Civil War era within a larger imperial framework. Certain racial trends that were implicit in Rugemer and Karp’s chapters are more explicitly described in Dubrulle’s chapter – namely, that Americans who became increasingly sensitive to the maintenance of racial boundaries and hierarchies during the mid-19th century did so in lock step with privileged white contemporaries throughout the Anglophone world. By contrast, James M. McPherson’s characteristically lucid contribution reevaluates the importance of ethnic nationalism to Confederates who, he argues, came to see the Civil War less as a fratricidal conflict and more as dispute between two ethnically distinct peoples. McPherson shows how Confederates – or at least the planter class – drew on dubious genealogical evidence to trace their ancestry to 17th-century English Cavaliers (a naturally ‘ruling race’ descended from the Normans) as opposed to the Saxon-descended Puritans who migrated to New England. What emerges in McPherson’s telling is a depiction of the American Civil War wherein Southern Confederates wedded to concepts of ethnic nationalism and Northern Unionists wedded to competing

concepts of civic nationalism took to arms to begin a war that has continued ever since – whether it be played out on the battlefield, over Lost Cause memories, or in courtrooms that continue to deliberate over just how inclusive the rights of American citizenship should be.

The second section applies the broader arguments of the first to more specific cases of transnational connections and experiences. David Gleeson's essay, for instance, explores the problematic status of English immigrants in the United States during the Civil War. And whereas McPherson's chapter cast ethnic nationalism in terms of genealogical fictions and mythmaking, Gleeson demonstrates that the Civil War presented English immigrants with a string of practical risks and opportunities. Focusing on the subset of Englishmen who identified as members of St. George's Societies, Gleeson reveals the extent to which their inclusion into American civic nationalism was contingent on context rather than dictated on the basis of pre-existing Anglo-American affinities and grievances. Alexander Noonan's essay also addresses the fluidity that can characterize transnational encounters, using a nuanced reading of the Russian-American 'Fleet Episode' of 1863 to show that multiple, contested, and 'selectively embellished' meanings of the event had malleable but real-world results (p. 135). Niels Eichhorn's chapter follows by taking the impact of European geopolitics a step further; making a comprehensive case that calculations concerning the Rhine River region in Germany had a determining influence on British and continental European efforts to limit their engagement in a North American war.

The final section of essays is the most diverse with five contributions that range widely in time, place, and method to stress a truly varied selection of the American Civil War's international implications. Aaron Sheehan-Dean's chapter turns to the laws of war – a field that's garnered some attention of late in light of John Fabian Witt's Bancroft Prize-winning *Lincoln's Code* (3) – to argue that the American Civil War was consciously fought 'in accordance to global standards' (p. 172). Union and Confederate leaders appealed to international law concepts such as 'retaliation,' Sheehan-Dean contends, to justify their place in a civilized world of nations and to limit the violence of their military engagements in comparison to even bloodier civil wars of the period in China and Paraguay. Aaron W. Marrs' take on the creation of the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series considers the longer-term significance of Civil War-era foreign relations. According to Marrs, the *FRUS* – an annually produced official compilation of American diplomatic documents – may have been a transparently political endeavor when it began in 1863 under the Lincoln administration but it was also a harbinger of greater government accountability to its citizens and an indication that those citizens evinced considerable interest in the conduct of their foreign affairs. Christopher Wilkins' chapter turns the tables on American Civil War foreign relations more substantially in his examination of the Caribbean perspective on debates over the annexation of Santo Domingo. In one of the volume's clearest illustrations of the American Civil War's transnational impact Wilkins shows how a group of black colonists who had fled to Santo Domingo to escape their treatment in the United States in the mid-1820s came to be so convinced of the United States' transformation by 1870 that they advocated in support of an annexation campaign that would have put their new home back into the same Union they had risked their lives to flee.

Jane E. Schultz's interpretation of Florence Nightingale's impact on women in the American Civil War returns the volume to more familiar terrain but does so with a less familiar take on Nightingale's impact as a transatlantic icon. For Americans, Schultz argues, Nightingale was read as a 'multifaceted text' and constructed into an 'iconic figure' that encouraged women to professionalize nursing, participate in military efforts, and become more part of public life without threatening middle-class values by doing so. Lesley Marx's essay expands on this theme of cultural construction, offering a personal narrative of her own evolving relationship with David O. Selznick's classic film interpretation of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. As an ethnically white South African growing up under Apartheid in a middle-class movie-loving household, Marx eloquently illuminates how *Gone with the Wind* constructed her understanding of South Africa's racial past as much as it did her understanding of race issues in the United States. Marx draws some fascinating parallels between South African and the United States history in the process that should prove especially thought provoking to those of us who grew to know the United States by consuming images of it from abroad.

A roundtable on memory serves as a coda to the volume's scholarly essays. In an attempt not to overlook the individual and the local for the sake of the global a selection of subjective responses are elicited from public history workers (most of whom enjoy double lives as academic historians or *vice versa*) on the question of why the American Civil War is still worth remembering. In all, the roundtable emphasizes just how personal American Civil War memory remains despite its 150-year remove. Most participants express bewilderment at the sheer scale of destruction, sadness that Americans allowed it to happen in the first place, and frustration that discussion of the conflict remains so divisive. O. Vernon Burton delivers the roundtable's first and longest contribution: an uncompromising argument in favor of remembering the Civil War as a conflict over slavery (not states' rights), as a watershed moment for the meaning of liberty around the world (not simply as the emancipation of slaves), and as one part of a far lengthier war over the creation of an interracial American democracy (the violence continued long after Appomattox).

Most contributions to the roundtable thereafter pivot on Edmund L. Drago's suggestion that reconciliation for Americans can only come 'with good will and genuine humility' (p. 285). However, differences arise over how go about demonstrating such good intentions. Should we visit slave cabins, for instance, to experience evidence of the past uncolored by present politics (W. Eric Emerson) or should we support the projects of those who sleep in slave cabins to attract attention to the 'neglected story' of African American participation (Joseph McGill)? Theodore Rosengarten uses his family's immigrant history to focus on remembering the war's more progressive outcomes – that the 14th and 15th amendments in particular allowed millions of immigrants from around the world to experience a 'passage from old world despotism to new world democracy, from statelessness to citizenship' (p. 291). But from across the Atlantic Amanda Foreman identifies a more ambiguous legacy of the American Civil War. Just like Civil War era Americans were quick to reintegrate ex-Confederate officers back into the American society, Foreman points out, so too are former IRA leaders now enjoying prominent peacetime careers in a British union they until only recently sought to terrorize. If the American Civil War has a lesson for modern Britain, Foreman posits, it's that the wounds and divisions conveniently 'forgotten' in the name of reconciliation can take an awful long time to heal.

Like most attempts at global history the collection remains vulnerable to criticism that it fails to deliver on the all-encompassing coverage expected of the genre. It would be easy, for example, to protest that if the American Civil War really were a global conflict that it's hard to see from this volume how exactly the *whole* globe fits into it – Asia receives precious few mentions and the Pacific, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and Africa (save for South Africa) don't get much play at all. That said, however, this volume rightly asserts its success at weaving the traditionally insular narratives of American Civil War history into a more globalized tapestry. Whether doing so will help raise the level of civic discourse surrounding the American Civil War is tougher to determine. Current controversy over the 'internationalization' of U.S. history in American high school curriculums suggests that academic advocates for a global history of the American Civil War won't enjoy a free pass to the center stage of public opinion.⁽⁴⁾

In sum, *The Civil War as Global Conflict* stands as testament to the fact that the American Civil War had global dimensions and that its transnational meanings, causes, and consequences matter. Readers of the volume will likely be convinced (if they weren't already) that the American Civil War was fought and observed by people who spared far more than a thought for the world beyond their borders. And if positioning the American Civil War as a global conflict still strikes some as an inherently unsettling task then this collection makes holding onto such reservations a good deal harder to justify.

Notes

1. A representative spread of these events include: 'South and the World in the Civil War Era' symposium at Rice University, February 2009, which led to a special issue in *The Journal of the Civil War Era* on 'New Approaches to Internationalizing the History of the Civil War Era', ed. W. Caleb McDaniel and Bethany L. Johnson, 2 (June 2012); two conferences on 'The Transnational Significance of the American Civil War: A Global History' at Friedrich-Schiller-University, Jena, in September 2011 & at the German Historical Institute in September 2012; a conference on the international significance of Abraham Lincoln at St. Catherine's College, Oxford in July 2009, which was later published as *The Global Lincoln*, ed. Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton (Oxford, 2011); 'Secession as an International Phenomenon' conference in Charleston, SC, December 2007, which was later published as *Secession as an International Phenomenon: From America's Civil War to Contemporary Separatist Movements*, ed. Don H. Doyle (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010); 'The American Civil War in Global Context' at George Mason University in May 2014, convened by the Virginia Sesquicentennial Commission. Important published 'conversations' on the topic include 'Interchange: nationalism and internationalism in the era of the Civil War', *Journal of American History*, 98 (September 2011), 455–89; 'AHR conversation: on transnational history', *American Historical Review*, 111 (December 2006), 1441–64.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. On early influential calls for a transnational approach to the history of the United States, see: David Thelen, 'Of audiences, borderlands, and comparisons: toward the internationalization of American history', *Journal of American History*, 79 (September 1992), 432–62; Ian Tyrrell, 'American exceptionalism in an age of international history', *American Historical Review*, 96 (October 1991), 1031–55; *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley, CA, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. John Fabian Witt, *Lincoln's Code: The Laws of War in American History* (New York, NY, 2013).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See, for example: Stanley Kurtz, 'How the college board politicized U.S. history', *National Review Online*, 25 August 2014 <<http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/386202/how-college-board-politicized-us-history-stanley-kurtz> [2]> [accessed 14 September 2014].[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review, and does not wish to comment further.

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1687>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/109016>

[2] <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/386202/how-college-board-politicized-us-history-stanley-kurtz>