
Book Reviews

America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation

David Goldfield

New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011. Hardcover; 632 pages; 14 colour illustrations; RRP \$70.00; ISBN: 978-1-59691-702-6

Can anyone say anything new about the American Civil War? As the 150th anniversary celebrations of this conflict continue, could this be the time for a new perspective, about its origins, its key stories and its aftermath? David Goldfield acknowledges the existing wealth of scholarly texts on the Civil War, but puts forward an interesting exploration of the antebellum period (1820-1877) in the United States in his book *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation*. As a new insight into how sectional divisions developed and reached boiling point, Goldfield carefully explains his work covering this contentious period of American history. He relates the events which led to a bloody domestic war and brings the period to a close with peace conditional upon the reinterpretation of an American identity and nation. His re-telling of events is concerned with “how we [Americans] got into the war, how the war transformed the men who fought, and how America came out of the war.” In fact, Goldfield hopes that his “treatment of the war’s origins, the conflict itself, and its aftermath will enable readers to view the Civil War from a new perspective” (p. 1).

Having studied the Civil War for many years now, I found Goldfield’s work to be refreshing as he presented the complex concepts of this period in easy to understand language. He does not assume that the reader is in possession of a wide knowledge of this crucial time in American history: instead, Goldfield carefully deconstructs these ideas in such a way that I was reminded of how I first learnt this fascinating history. One of these concepts is the American idea of freedom, and Goldfield explains how the United States had been founded on the beliefs of independence and liberty, ideals which were not readily found in the European monarchies. He notes how this Revolutionary and republican legacy was a deeply rooted mindset, where “America was still an experiment, a lonely outpost of democratic government in a world dominated by autocracy and littered with failed attempts at self government” (p. 4).

Another of these important themes which Goldfield brings to the fore is how this central tenant of freedom was a contested notion well before the Civil War’s first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, South Carolina on April 12, 1861. He specifically looks at how Northerners and Southerners held differing and highly competing notions of their freedom and what constituted being an American. For those Americans living in what were known as the Northern *Free States*, freedom was to be realised through one’s own

labour as this allowed the individual to acquire enough wealth to commence his own business and employ other free white male labourers. Through this process a white man in the North could rise to the highest level of society to count himself amongst the elite. For Southerners, however, freedom and social advancement could only be obtained through the ownership and accumulation of black slaves. The more slaves a white man possessed, the higher his social status. Yet, as the 1850s drew to a close and the anti-slavery Republican Party seemed on the verge of claiming the Federal government in 1860, these sectional differences could no longer be negotiated to maintain the status quo of two opposite socio-economic systems within the one nation. Goldfield highlights this tension and misunderstanding saying, "Slavery lay at the core of these differences" as Southerners considered it to be "a divinely sanctioned institution" while northerners saw it as "a damning sin" (p. 192).

For most people not entirely familiar with the American Civil War, this conflict resulted because of either slavery's brutality upon black people in bondage, or was born out of the North's desire to free the slave and abolish this institution. But the Civil War was not initially about freeing black people from slavery; it was about freeing white people from the dependence on slavery or white people leaving the work to others rather than socially advancing from their own free labour. Or as Goldfield explained, "Southern whites, in denying freedom for the black man, now threatened freedom for" all white Americans (p. 26). It needs to be kept in mind that under systems of both free labour and slavery African Americans had no place except to hold up the social ladder by occupying the lowest rung. So as Goldfield argues, the Civil War was over the competing ideas and interpretations of American freedom.

Goldfield's *America Aflame* makes a valuable contribution to the existing American Civil War scholarship during the 150th celebrations of this defining event in US history. Goldfield offers readers a wonderful opportunity to learn about the Civil War in ways that are easily understood. I recommend this book to both beginners and more advanced students of the American Civil War.

Darren Dobson
Monash University

In Hospital and Camp: The Civil War Through the Eyes of its Doctors and Nurses

Harold Elk Straubing

Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2014. Paperback; 176 pages; RRP \$19.95; ISBN: 978-0-8117-0138-9

In the 21st century we accept that death from common diseases such as measles is extremely rare. We expect, and demand, that our medicos administer proper pain relief when necessary, and prescribe antibiotics and other miracle drugs to stop minor infections from developing into raging sepsis that can ravage and kill. We hope they will medi-vac us to hospital when we fall in remote locations. In the 21st century we take for granted the medical expertise and the technological marvels of the modern emergency room. This compilation of the recollections of ten physicians, nurses and medics takes us into the medical arena of the Civil War, where shot and shell brought disfigurement and death, where even the strongest warriors succumbed to infection, and where disease spread like wildfire through encampments. It gives us a brief glimpse into not only medical practice in the field and in hospitals, but also into the men and women who served as doctors and nurses and who were often ill-prepared for the rigours of tending the wounded.

Three of the selections are literary pieces - by Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and Frederick Law - while there are five reports by surgeons from both the Union and the Confederacy and two items from volunteer nurses. All have appeared in print before. The accounts range from the horrifying clinical surgical notes of a doctor to the forthright concerns of a dedicated nurse and even include some lyric lines from Walt Whitman. There is also the account of a young volunteer on her first day as a nurse who published her account in 1869. The title of Straubing's compilation has borrowed from her work, *In Hospital and Field*. Straubing's introduction offers the reader a brief but informative background to the hardships medical personnel faced and the conditions under which they laboured, with limited experience and lack of equipment. (Who knew there were only 600 thermometers for the entire Union forces?) Brief introductions to the selections give context but are not weighed down with unnecessary details, while the bibliography directs the reader to further material for those who would seek to learn more.

While there are many first-person accounts of the Civil War, with seemingly more published every year, these ten pieces have been judiciously selected to provide the reader with insight concerning the fear and the agony of the sick and wounded together with the despair of those attempting to preserve lives under horrendous conditions. This publication gives a taste of Civil War history that is sometimes overshadowed by political and military tomes, and shows the human toll of battles fought in the mud and blood, and where men fell under a hail of shot and shell. It gives a voice to those who worked so hard to save them.

Kathleen Shaw
Monash University