

War without End

The Ongoing Struggle over the American Civil War

Susan–Mary Grant

Books

John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*, Vol. 2, *The Coming of the Civil War, 1850–1861*. Cambridge University Press, 2007, 694 pages

Christopher Clark, *Social Change in America: From the Revolution through the Civil War*. Ivan Dee, 2006, 352 pages

Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2006, 216 pages

WAR, THE TITLE of journalist Chris Hedges’s 2005 book asserted, “is a force that gives us meaning.” Whether one concurs with the premise or not, in the particular case of the American Civil War of 1861–65, here we have a conflict in which historians and general readers alike seem to find, or seem to be seeking, meaning. The number of existing books on the Civil War equates to one a day since Robert E Lee surrendered at Appomattox; books on Lincoln alone, with the imminent anniversary of his birth in 2009, are reaching that level of output, and the sesquicentennial of the war in 2011 will no doubt see the rate of publication of Civil War material – in print and on–line – increase. The Civil War sells, but what, exactly, is it selling? In its origins and its outcome, the changes it wrought, those it failed to, and those that did not last, through the force represented by its armies in the field and the involvement of the non–combatant population, through its pulpits, its preachers, and its politicians, above all through the termination of slavery, the American Civil War offers, it seems, the ultimate guide to the meaning of America as a nation, to American nationalism and, beyond that, to American mission.

The Civil War has been termed the “Second American Revolution,” a designation that highlights a variety of aspects of the conflict from different angles: from the Confederacy’s invocation of the Revolutionary generation of ’76, through the eventual emancipation of the slaves, to the complete realignment of the economic and political balance between North and South in the aftermath of a war that had destroyed the South’s economy and ushered in the dominance of northern capitalists who

constructed what became the modern American state. For John Ashworth, it is this latter construction of “revolution” that interests him; the Civil War was, in his view, the “United States’ bourgeois revolution,” in which Union victory was “both cause and consequence of the superiority of the northern social system, or, conversely, of the inferiority of the slave mode of production.” The Civil War, he argues, was one fought “to vindicate American democracy, and the capitalist economy of the North.” In a closely–argued work, the second of two immensely detailed volumes on the interaction between slavery, capitalism and politics in antebellum America, Ashworth juxtaposes Whigs, Republicans and Democrats, slavery and antislavery within a structure that follows each through to what Ashworth emphasizes was the increasingly inevitable “secession and war.”

Ashworth does not, however, traverse the antebellum political and ideological landscape in a straight line from the Compromise of 1850 to the secession winter of 1860/61, but rather veers back and forth between 1848 and 1861, examining the perspectives of, among others, southern militants, free blacks, the Republicans and their Whig antecedents, drawing each in turn inexorably toward the election of 1860 and the secession of South Carolina from the Union. For general readers, this approach makes for neither a fluid nor an easy read; but Ashworth’s intended audience seems to be less the reader with an interest in the origins of the Civil War than those elements of the historical profession still fighting intellectual and interpretative battles whose origins reach back to the work of James Ford Rhodes at the start of the twentieth century but whose nodal point remains the Marxist or “Beardian” (after the work of Charles and Mary Beard) interpretation of the conflict as the “Second American Revolution” in its role as catalyst for the transition from agrarianism to capitalism in the United States. Ashworth’s sophisticated analysis of the increasing antagonisms between North and South is, as he highlights, “heavily derived from Marxist categories and Marxist analysis,” but seeks new directions in its “heavy emphasis upon the weaknesses of slavery in comparison with wage labor,” its wider perspective on economic forces and interests, and its incorporation of the work and conclusions of social historians with the political arena. Nevertheless, the

reader may too frequently be aware that Ashworth is engaged in an ongoing internal dialogue to which she is not fully party (although the Appendix to Vol. 2, “A review of some major works on the reasons for Confederate defeat” does provide some glimpse of who Ashworth is arguing with, and why). The ghosts of past debates haunt the pages of this study in ways that have less to do with the requisite historiographical contextualization of a thesis but relate more, perhaps, to arguments that the author is struggling not just to refute but to put to rest.

Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic, Vol. 2, *The Coming of the Civil War, 1850–1861* (it was originally intended to be subtitled *Towards a Bourgeois Revolution*) is not, of course, a stand-alone analysis, but needs to be read within the context of the first volume of this study (Vol. 1: *Commerce and Compromise, 1820–1850*), which appeared in 1985. In that first volume, Ashworth emphasised the fact that the “growth of an increasingly market-orientated economy was a dominant feature of the second quarter of the nineteenth century,” and it is this growth that is traced and analysed in Christopher Clark’s *Social Change in America: From the Revolution through the Civil War*. By bookending his analysis with the two formative wars that created and defended (if not defined) respectively the American nation, Clark’s title, at least, serves to remind us that the United States is a nation constructed through conflict – as many are – and that conflict defines and constrains, to a persistent extent, American national identity. The cost of these conflicts does, in the case of the Revolution at least, get a mention in Clark’s study, but for the most part it is not warfare but the American historical profession’s sacred triumvirate of race, class and gender that forms the framework for Clark’s take on social change in this period. Where Ashworth’s study focused very much on race and class – particularly, in the case of slavery, on what he defines as “class without class consciousness” – Clark adopts a broader perspective, one in which the political players that formed the main focus of Ashworth’s work barely get a name-check.

Clark has identified six themes through which to explore and explain the reshaping of social relationships between the Revolution and the Civil War: families and households, work and labour, the interactions between households, labour and property, the role of social elites, regions and regional differences and, finally, the impact of (mainly Westward) expansion. For Clark, everything stems from the home. “The notion that households were miniature versions of society at large was more than just an intellectual conceit,” he stresses. “Society was in fact built up of households with various patterns of

dependency within or between them. Household authority provided either the basis or the model for a range of means by which labor could be compelled from others.” It was “within the bounds of assumptions about social hierarchy and deference,” Clark argues, that opposition to British rule began, which is fine as a summary of those ideological forces behind the Revolution; but it is when he turns to the other conflict, the famous “House Divided” that was the Civil War, that his sweeping narrative is in danger of pushing too much under the carpet. The problem really starts with the Revolution, however, since although Clark highlights Thomas Paine’s growing disillusionment with the revolutionary cause, as historians of the Early Republic have long emphasised. Revolutionary ideals and symbols, including Paine himself, having served their purpose, were too readily sidelined in the context of a nation not just on the move demographically and geographically, but moving on ideologically. It is as well to remember, in a social history of the Early Republic and antebellum eras that places so much emphasis on dependency, that barely a dozen people paid their respects when Paine was laid to rest in New York in the summer of 1809; as Clark shows in relation to slavery, by that point significant elements of the revolutionary ideal had preceded him into the ground. By the 1850s “the total value of slaves held in the South exceeded the total capital invested in transport, manufacturing, and banking throughout the United States,” and the nation’s, not just the South’s, “largest capital investment continued to be in slave labor.”

Clark’s is a deliberately broad-brush survey of America between the (main) wars that defined the nation, and therefore somewhat reflective of the state of social history at the time of writing. It is therefore not, perhaps, surprising that whilst Clark highlights the human cost of the Revolution in terms not of death, as such, but of suffering, when he turns to the Civil War he falls back on the death toll (wrongly described as still greater than “all the U.S. military deaths in all the nation’s other wars combined”) as the gauge of that conflict’s severity, passing only briefly over the “scores of thousands more ... maimed or disfigured for life.” The avoidance – or at least the lack of sustained attention accorded – of the social impact of the Civil War on America speaks to a larger difficulty as far as the merging of social and military, and even medical history is concerned. Almost two decades have passed since Maris Vinovskis asked whether social historians had lost the Civil War and, in the years since, few have risen to that challenge. Clark is fully cognisant of Vinovskis’s work, and when he describes the Civil War death toll as “bearable” for the Union he means this, as he

emphasises, only “in a structural sense.” Yet the almost cursory dismissal of the cost of the war to the North recalls a point made almost half a century ago by Richard Shryock, who took issue with C. Vann Woodward’s now famous comments on “The Irony of Southern History,” specifically Woodward’s suggestion that the “South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America ... the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction.” History, he concluded, had happened in the South. “It follows, by implication,” noted Shryock, “that the death of thousands of fathers and sons in the North aroused no lasting feeling of this nature. Where victory was followed by prosperity, there was hardly even a surviving awareness of national tragedy.”

Clark is too careful an historian to leave readers with the sense that Union victory in the Civil War was an unqualified success, socially, economically or morally; nevertheless, the resultant expansion of a new kind of dependency – that of the war pension – and the undoubted social impact on households, North and South, of newly-dependent veterans, might have merited at least a mention. Admittedly the full economic and social implications of the expansion of the federal pension system so comprehensively laid out by Theda Skocpol in her 1992 study, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, did not make themselves felt until later in the nineteenth century; however, the social impact of so many wounded men (current estimates suggest the figure was in the region of some half a million, a full twenty-five “scores of thousands”) returning home in 1865 cannot have been less than considerable. Given the scale of Clark’s undertaking, it is perhaps inevitable that some aspects of the changing social patterns of the Civil War era fail to make it into what is an extremely detailed and informative work; yet just as Ashworth focused on the question of why the South lost, so Clark, too, never really considers the question of how the North won, nor the cost of that victory, questions that are not definitively answered, but are addressed, in Mark Noll’s brief but insightful consideration of *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*.

That religion was not accorded a more substantial role in Clark’s study (or, indeed, in Ashworth’s) is perhaps surprising given its importance to Americans between the Revolution and the Civil War. In 1860, as Noll reports, “between a third and two-fifths of Americans were formal members of churches,” compared to today when “about two-thirds of Americans claim church membership.” Yet here the figures do not tell the whole story, since the rate of church attendance was “probably double the rate of membership” in the

antebellum period; today the statistics are reversed, for “only a little more than half of the Americans who claim membership in a religious body regularly attend their places of worship.” Religion was, therefore, not only a crucial component of the daily lives of many antebellum Americans, but the lens through which the Civil War was, frequently, refracted and explained. Whilst Clark is quite right to stress the numerical superiority of the North, in a conflict fought mainly by volunteer forces, the fact that one side had a statistical superiority in the census did not automatically translate into a numerical advantage on the battlefield. As leading statesman Daniel Webster observed during the frequently forgotten (but not by Clark) War of 1812, any war fought by the citizen soldiers of the United States required popular support. “Unlike the old nations of Europe,” Webster observed, “there are in this country no dregs of population, fit only to supply the constant waste of war, and out of which an army can be raised, for hire, at any time, and for any purpose. Armies of any magnitude can here be nothing but the people embodied – and if the object be one for which the people will not embody, there can be no armies.” Reinforcing Webster’s point, Noll opens his study by observing that in the fateful secession winter of 1860/61, the question in the North was not how to preserve the Union, but whether to try.

In galvanising northerners for action, the churches played a crucial role, and Noll has written widely on this subject elsewhere. Yet *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* is not a study of the ways in which the pulpit preached patriotism to the Union, defended slavery to the Confederacy, and assured congregations North and South that theirs was the just cause; rather, this volume, the outcome of a series of lectures delivered in 2003, offers an accessible, although certainly not a simplistic, introduction to what is an extremely complex subject and one, further, that remains relatively underexplored by historians: theological debate in the Civil War era. “The paucity of interest” in the question of how the Civil War “was interpreted as a theological event at the time,” and its contribution “to the history of theology more generally,” is, Noll points out, “astounding in light of the overwhelmingly Christian population of both North and South, the centrality of religious argument in justifying the existence and the actions of both the Union and the Confederacy, and the substantial Christian presence that remains in the United States to this day.” His own explanation for this relative neglect may surprise some and dismay others; historical neglect notwithstanding, Noll argues, “we can surmise that lack of attention to theological profundity in the Civil War is almost

certainly related to the fact that there simply existed so little theological profundity.”

Although warfare, and Noll notes “the more cataclysmic the better,” is frequently “the mother of theological profundity,” this was not the case in the Civil War. If religion was one of the glues holding an increasingly diverse and expanding Union together for much of the period under discussion in Clark’s work, by the mid-1840s this bond was already loosening with the schism of both the Baptist and Methodist churches along sectional lines. It was not that old certainties were fading; very far from it. Noll usefully and succinctly traces the growth of “the alliance between religious values and Enlightenment, covenantal, and republican values” in the years preceding the Civil War, and stresses that theological “reasoning during the Civil War rested on this grand intellectual alliance.” Its weakness lay in its inability to “unify the nation’s sectional interests,” and so the “story of theology in the Civil War was a story of how a deeply entrenched intellectual synthesis divided against itself.” Since God did not manifest Himself with any degree of clarity to either side, it “was left to those consummate theologians, the Reverend Doctors Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, to decide what in fact the Bible actually meant,” Noll observes, a conclusion that sails close to the argument that God is usually on the side of the biggest battalions. Ulysses S. Grant was never very happy when he heard that particular argument, or any variation of it, but in its theological manifestation, of course, with Union victory came a resolution of sorts that northern scriptural interpretation, in a new, secular form was and would for evermore be the American way. In the war’s aftermath, Noll points out, “more and more intellectual leaders would be secular, agnostic, or simply uninterested in religion.”

Noll’s book comes at an important time in Civil War historiography generally, in part because there has been an upsurge of interest in religion’s role in the Civil War (and Noll’s notes provide an excellent summary of the state of the field in this regard), in part, too, because some Civil War historians still evince a degree of discomfort with the subject, and an unwillingness, in some respects, to marry up the political platform with the pulpit. In the case of the Civil War, of course, the two were really not separable, and in the particular case of the Union war effort, pulpits, politicians and the press in the North achieved a powerful degree of unanimity in the attempt to persuade the population that the United States represented a Union worth fighting for. In the crucial election of 1864, this process reached an apogee of sorts when, three days before polling, Methodist Bishop Matthew Simpson announced that

“[i]f the world is to be raised to its proper place, I would say with all reverence, God cannot do without America.” Abraham Lincoln’s approach to the vexed subject of God’s will was more muted and, historians recognise, more complex. Noll cites Lincoln’s famous but private “Meditation on the Divine Will,” which took public form in his Second Inaugural, described by James Tackach as Lincoln’s “election jeremiad,” and by Mark Neely as “more like a sermon than a secular political appeal.” For Noll, Lincoln’s speech, one that the president himself described as “a truth which ... needed to be told,” represented a “theological statement of rare depth,” but one directed at an audience few of which “could actually agree that God was in control and that human observers might not know what he was doing.”

Yet the uncertainties that beset Lincoln, and seemed not to beset Matthew Simpson, were perhaps more crucially symbolic of the Civil War and its cost than we have yet appreciated, and in this regard Noll’s study serves as a timely transition between the many recent studies of religion and the Civil War and a new, more general Civil War scholarship that, by incorporating the findings of, among others, Noll himself, Richard Carwardine, Eugene Genovese and Charles Reagan Wilson, seeks to complicate some of the traditional certainties about that conflict, on which so much has been written but, as seems clear, so much remains yet to write. Particularly as regards the still vexed subject of slavery, historians of the Union have, with few exceptions, for too long avoided the implications of faith and the fate of the freedmen. As Edward Blum recently argued in his study *Reforging the White Republic*, religion was the “primary matrix through which many Americans interpreted, evaluated, and articulated their experiences and ideas,” yet historians too “implicitly assume that religion was not a salient feature of postwar America,” thereby restricting our appreciation of the role religion played in the “retreat from Reconstruction.” Yet it is not Reconstruction alone that is the subject of reassessment in the new histories of the Civil War, but the war years themselves. Studies such as Harry S. Stout’s *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* and Chandra Manning, *What this Cruel War Was Over* work to reincorporate race and religion into our appreciation of the rank and file of the armies who fought the Civil War.

Noll, too, whilst discussing some of the most influential works arguing for, among the elites at least, a secularisation of post-Civil War American society, draws our attention back to the majority of Americans “for whom the war did not secularize traditional beliefs, but rather intensified them or left them undisturbed.” “From the historical record,” he

concludes, “it is clear that the American Civil War generated a first-order theological crisis over how to interpret the Bible, how to understand the work of God in the world, and how to exercise the authority of theology in a democratic society.” The results of this crisis, as Noll summarises them, can seem somewhat downbeat: even before the secularization of the modern period, “Protestants during the Civil War,” he argues, “had marginalized themselves as bearers of a religious perspective in the body politic.” He regards this as a mixed blessing. On the one hand, “deep, religiously-rooted moral conviction” can struggle to be heard on subjects such as “unfettered capitalism” or “violent ethnic discrimination.” On the other, a more secular America is, he proposes, a safer and more welcoming America, a nation spared the “further shooting wars caused by the kind of strong but religiously divided self-assurance that fuelled the Civil War.”

The history of other nations may reinforce this point, but what Noll does not highlight is the more subtle but perhaps more insidious link forged between warfare and religion in American identity; if individual Americans have moved toward the secular over the course of the nation’s history, the nation itself has moved ever closer to the sacred. Religious rhetoric in defence of the United States as, in Ernest Lee Tuveson’s phrase, a “redeemer nation,” whose people are chosen for a divine global purpose, has always been, since the nation’s inception, associated with warfare. At the start of the twenty-first century, however, it is again politicians, rather than theologians, on whom the media spotlight is turned; it is through partisan interpretations of American mission that the concept of the chosen people is revived and disseminated. The twenty-first century politician presses buttons hard-wired into the American psyche, placed there by the Revolution that produced the nation, and the Civil War that saved it. In this context it is worth recalling that one of the accusations hurled by Sarah Palin at Barack Obama in the 2008 American presidential contest was the suggestion that he was “not a man who sees America as you see it and how I see America. We see America as the greatest force for good in the world,” she asserted, in a modern echo of Bishop Matthew Simpson. Palin, of course, was not simply preaching to the converted in her invocation of the United States as a “beacon of light and hope for others” throughout the world, but referencing a theme as old as the American nation itself. The three fine studies examined above offer some important insights into the persistence of that secular self-assurance from, respectively, a political, a social, and a theological perspective; when it comes to the American Civil

War, and its bequest to the nation it produced, the search for meaning continues.

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