

# The Civil War At 150: Afterword



For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground  
And tell sad stories of the death of kings

When we think of the place of Civil War memory in American life, we are apt to think rather narrowly—of reenactors and rebel flags, kitsch and cultural dysfunction. The preceding essays paint a more heartening portrait—of college students poring over the war diary of a free black woman from Philadelphia; of runners marking the Sand Creek massacre; of a National Park Service engaged in reflective self-assessment; of Kentucky rejoining the Land of Lincoln; of a movie industry grappling with the kidnapping of free blacks into bondage; of the dawning awareness that, as a country, we never fully forgot that the war was about slavery, and we never gave up the fight for equality. We are fighting for it still.

None of this is to declare victory. As Barbara Fields said in 1990, the Civil War will be fought until what was promised is finally delivered. Slavery was defeated only to be replaced by debt peonage and then by whatever it is that we have now. Once it was chain gangs, Jim Crow, and grandfather clauses effectively gutting the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. Now it is the prison-industrial complex, resegregation, and voter suppression. Such disasters are caused by systemic forces and a massive failure of political

will—but not by a failure to remember the war right. Indeed, it is partly because we do remember the war (mostly) right that we can identify these problems as *problems*.

History *can be* empowering but it *should be* deeply humbling. History is our burden as well as our gravity. It is what we live down as well as what we carry forward.

Closing this special issue on the Civil War at 150, I find myself curious about how the war will be remembered fifty years from now, at its bicentennial. I do not mean to speculate on whether we will be touring Gettysburg in flying cars. (Electric cars would be marvelous enough.) Rather, I wonder about the place of the Civil War in a future generation's cultural memory. Here it may be instructive to examine the academy itself, not because the academy drives the culture—it rides the same wave—but because the academy is the tip of that wave, leaning out, breaking first. There are two broad (and largely reconcilable) forces at work in Civil War historiography today. The first is completing the important work of putting slavery and emancipation at the center of the war's causes, conduct, and legacy—and it is trickier work than you might imagine. No serious scholar now denies that slavery caused the war. (Charles Dew iced this case with *Apostles of Disunion* in 2001.) But proving that the South seceded to defend slavery is not the same as proving that the North went to war to destroy it. This case has been made with greater urgency and effectiveness only in the last ten years. Chandra Manning demonstrated how the Union Army became abolitionized from the bottom up; James Oakes has shown that virtually every Northerner, including Lincoln, who pledged “not to interfere with slavery where it already existed” was essentially lying because they, like Southerners, believed that to contain slavery was to kill it; and Caroline Janney has suggested that none of this was ever wholly forgotten in the “romance of reunion.” All of these scholars, and a host of others, are heirs to the neoabolitionist tradition, stretching back to W.E.B. Dubois, and holding increasing sway since the Civil Rights Movement.

Toiling beside them has been another group of scholars, the heirs to what has been called the “new revisionist” tradition, who, while emphatically agreeing that the destruction of slavery was a good and a great thing, find little to celebrate in a country that enslaved people for centuries and then had to kill 750,000 in the process of (finally) doing the right thing, which frankly was done rather haphazardly and without sufficient safeguards. This emphasis on the greed, imperialism, and destruction that grew into and out of the war has been called (in informal circles) the historiography's “dark turn.” But in truth, the difference between the two schools is simply one of emphasis. The neoabolitionists see a conflict that can be redeemed by its results: the freedom of four million people. The neorevisionists welcome the results but remain skeptical of the process. Though they tussle occasionally, the two traditions need each other. The neorevisionists keep the historiography from veering into self-righteousness or triumphalism. The neoabolitionists keep the historiography from veering into despondency or nihilism.

It is not a debate that can sustain a fifty-year historiography, however. With the humanities in a (partly contrived) crisis, historians are under tremendous pressure to justify their relevance. Certainly this is why all of us seem to have agreed without talking about it that we should begin to define ourselves as historians of a particular theme as much as a particular place and time. We are historians, then, of happiness, or capitalism, or the environment, or education, before we are historians of the antebellum South or turn-of-the-century Chicago. This gives us some claim to usefulness; in an increasingly global, "so-what" culture, we do not study the past *per se*—we study timelessly important things *in the laboratory of the past*.

We can sometimes diverge on the question of what we think we're accomplishing in our laboratories. Some of us are what I would call "how-things-work" historians. We study, say, the "plantation-industrial complex" because we want to understand capitalism. Others of us are what I would call "social justice" historians. We seek not merely to understand past systems of social injustice but implicitly to overthrow new ones. In both cases, though, the present value is front and center. And this is as it should be. Presentism—turning the dead into political sock puppets spouting a party line—is a historical sin worthy of condemnation. But present value? Our work should better have that. "The Earth belongs to the living," Jefferson said. Or, as Nietzsche noted, "We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life."

The essays collected here betray an academy eager to serve life. Gone is the handwringing over objectivity. Gone is the hectoring tone. There may still be morals stitched into our work, but they are stitched deep, less obvious, more forgiving and more flexible. As academics, we seek to guide, teach, and inform, but we don't have all the answers, and we know that.

The American people have come a long way too. They are content for their heroes to be less admirable; they feel a little less admirable themselves, and they are increasingly comfortable with the simple fact that history is mostly bad news. As Americans, it took us a long while to realize this. (To be fair, Russians had Ivan the Terrible. We had James Buchanan. We could work around him.) But now we begin our survey courses with the depopulation of a continent and end with the betrayed promise of Reconstruction. Everyone has agency; everyone makes a bad end; and students expect little else.

This is as it should be. History *can be* empowering but it *should be* deeply humbling. History is our burden as well as our gravity. It is what we live down as well as what we carry forward. In a tradition stretching back to Shakespeare and to Homer, history reminds us that we are none of us perfect and that we are all of us going to die. Mostly, history is a way of owning our smallness before time without being paralyzed, of finding ourselves in a flexible existential space, beyond blame, braced to do better, cognizant of the difficulties ahead. History, then, was and remains a morality tale. It is only the moral that changes. Today we often use history to teach the very real value of diversity, of inclusion, of social justice, of speaking truth to power, of exposing

capitalism to criticism, of confronting the inescapable reality that good countries do great wrongs that admit of no palliation. But we do so hoping that, fifty years from now, if we're very lucky, the Civil War will have all the relevance of the War of Jenkins Ear. And then, like historians of old, we will sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the deaths of kings and slaves, of midwives and milkmen and everyone in between—if only to remind ourselves how much we have to be thankful for, and how much to be sorry for.

## Further Reading

Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life" (1874) in *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge, 1983); Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York, 1961); Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, N.J., 1963); Leonard M. Marsak, *The Nature of Historical Inquiry* (New York, 1970); David Cannadine, ed., *What Is History Now?* (New York, 2002).

This article originally appeared in issue 14.2 (Winter, 2014).

---

Stephen Berry is Gregory Professor of the Civil War Era at the University of Georgia. He is the author or editor of four books on the nineteenth-century United States, including *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges* (2011).