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A People at War: Civilians and Soldiers in America's Civil War, 1854–1877

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the usual path, well inside the borders of “civilization,” as opposed to the risk and opportunity of breaking a trail in an unfamiliar world.

A People at War: Civilians and Soldiers in America’s Civil War, 1854–1877, by Scott Nelson and Carol Sheriff. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. xii, 372 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, chronologies, bibliography, index. \$25.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer William Feis is professor of history at Buena Vista University. He is the author of *Grant’s Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to Appomattox* (2002).

Among the many Civil War books published each year a few gems always stand out. *A People at War*, by Scott Nelson and Carol Sheriff, is certainly one. Against the backdrop of military and political events, Nelson and Sheriff focus on the experiences of common people whose names and lives are not lost to history, just relegated to its footnotes. Their approach fits perfectly within the “New Military History,” which is the study of warfare and societies or, as the authors assert, the examination of “enlisted men, substitutes, deserters, guerrillas, [and] medical personnel—not to mention the millions of civilians for whom the war was a day-to-day reality” (ix).

To set the stage, the authors spotlight an April 1865 photograph of a group of individuals taken outside the Washington offices of the U.S. Christian Commission. The image includes two Union amputees, a grim-looking Confederate soldier, a variety of women, and several well-dressed males, as well as common laborers, a few children, and one African American. The image captures a moment when all walks of wartime life mingled together. The purpose of the book, the authors contend, is to “animate this frozen image” (ix). Under five themes the authors examine everything from the “passions that led to the war” and formed the foundation for wartime behavior and beliefs to the efforts of leaders on both sides either to conform to the attitudes of their respective peoples or to gain their support for larger politico-military goals (x). The book begins in “Bleeding Kansas” and ends with the Election of 1877. In between, the authors use multiple voices to connect events, attitudes, and experiences of ordinary civilians and soldiers to the eventual outcome, impact, and ultimate meaning of the war. Amazingly, the authors accomplish this with a minimum of confusion, which is remarkable given the book’s pace and the vast and disparate topics.

In an ambitious study such as this, however, errors of fact and interpretation are inevitable. For example, the authors assert that,

throughout his failed Peninsula Campaign in 1862, General George B. McClellan “fought a traditional war with infantry, cavalry and artillery” and failed to “use slaves and former slaves to his advantage” (85). This is a puzzling statement given that, even after Union armies recruited former slaves and freedmen into military ranks, every general *still* fought using “traditional” infantry, cavalry, and artillery forces. Moreover, they proclaim that McClellan “failed to see the social revolution developing around him, failed to use the slaves who could have helped him, and failed to take Richmond” (85). This astonishingly naive statement implies that if only “Little Mac” had accepted that emancipation was inevitable and used slaves and former slaves as scouts, spies, and laborers, he would have taken the Confederate capital. With this sweeping statement, the authors overemphasize the potential contributions that they would have made and minimize the importance of the many other key factors that sank the Peninsula Campaign.

On this same topic, the authors assert that McClellan failed to use African Americans as spies and scouts and instead relied on Allan Pinkerton’s “bumbling force” of detectives “that proved useless in reconnaissance” (85). In fact, Pinkerton relied on a number of African Americans as paid scouts and spies and incidental informants, and his “detectives,” though not perfect, were not totally “useless.” More important, to attribute McClellan’s very real intelligence problems mainly to his failure to use African Americans as operatives is a vast oversimplification of a much more complex issue and gives far more weight to the potential contributions of African Americans than is warranted.

Finally, the authors believe that McClellan’s chief failure was not seeing the revolution in race relations unfolding before him. However, in a recent study of McClellan’s political and social background, Ethan Rafuse argues that the general rejected emancipation as a war aim and tried to sidestep the slavery issue during the campaign not because he failed to comprehend the times (he did understand them) but because his allegiance to the Whig principles of moderation and rationalism militated against unleashing a rash, unpredictable social revolution. Including this more nuanced view of “Little Mac” would have provided the authors with more connective tissue linking the politics and passions of the prewar period with the eventual conduct of the war.

These criticisms aside, *A People at War* is an excellent, well-written, broad overview of important yet often muted facets of Civil War history. Scholars, teachers, and buffs should all enjoy this inspired work.