
NEWSLETTER

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Society of Civil War Historians

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The Civil War in a New Age

The future of Civil War scholarship was the focus of the 2008 annual meeting of the Society of Civil War Historians, which was held in New Orleans on October 11. Technology's influence on historians' future work was highlighted. Featured speakers included Kevin Levin from St. Anne's Belfield School, Mark Grimsley from Ohio State University and University of Maryland, Baltimore County's Anne Rubin. Topics addressed included blogging, online research, and creating digital sources for Civil War historiography in the twenty-first century and beyond. Links to full text for these talks may be found at <http://cwmemory.com/?s=society+of+civil+war+historians+new+orleans+meeting>.

"Blogging the American Civil War" was presented by Kevin Levin who, in 2005 launched his website and blog, *Civil War Memory*, a site that intersects public history, memory, historiography, and assorted Civil War culture. An average of six hundred people per day from all walks of life and from all over the world visit Levin's site, highlighting the ongoing twenty-four hour a day conversation where bloggers discuss nearly every conceivable Civil War topic. Unfortunately, too few professional historians are involved, allowing some ideologues to master the art of mobilizing public opinion through misinformation.

As a high school teacher, Levin regards himself as an outsider (to academia proper), which is what attracted him to blogging, but which is also the source of his most common problems. Distrust of professional or academic historians is especially acute in the general Civil War community leading Levin to challenge the audience to raise the level of public discourse, bringing knowledge to the public and redefining what it means to be teachers or historians in the twenty-first century. Failure to engage with the general public simply reinforces the belief that academics are aloof and arrogant and leaves the internet content in the hands of ideologues.

Levin emphasizes that the very questions and issues that bring professional historians together for conferences (such as the one sponsored by the SCWH) deserve to be discussed in wider circles where the long term influence of such access is profound. With the Civil War sesquicentennial approaching, Levin urged historians to think creatively about how to use the internet to interact with the general public. He noted that the number of those who will read a book or visit a museum over the next few years will pale in comparison with those who will use the internet. Technology offers historians the "opportunity and the responsibility to contribute to and shape that content."

Ohio State University's Mark Grimsley discussed "The Virtual Archive Rat: Exploiting the Online Availability of Traditional Sources." Noting the truly revolutionary changes in research of all types that the internet has made available, Grimsley first referenced World Cat and Google books. He also noted the easy availability of dozens of Civil War era newspapers and magazines online. Though most of these are at the national level, current state projects are underway that will soon include letters, diaries, a number of public memoirs, reminiscences and regimental histories. He pointed out other well-known data bases that can be found online, such as the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Systems, and focused digital archive project, the Valley of the Shadow project, maintained by the University of Virginia.

The secret to exploiting the wide-ranging online availability is through keyword searches, which itself fundamentally alters research strategies. Boolean searches now reveal readily identifiable patterns that may have once eluded scholars. Not only are researchers now able to duplicate previous research efforts in half the time, they are also able to examine many more sources in a variety of innovative ways. While librarians have long recognized the benefit of transitioning from paper to digital storage as a strategy to expand and update libraries, the beauty of the digital age is that it democratizes research by making requisite sources available to those without easy access to major research libraries.

Grimsley left the audience with two observations. First, the Guttenberg age is clearly over and the digital age is here, like it or not. Immense opportunities exist for Civil
(continued on page 3)

New President Takes Office

President George Rable from the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa passed the office of president of the SCWH to James Marten, Professor and Chair of the Department of History at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Dr. Marten's books include *Texas Divided: Loyalty and Dissent in the Lone Star State* (1990); *The Children's Civil War* (2000); and *Children for the Union: The War Spirit on the Northern Homefront* (2004). Most recently he is the co-editor of *More Than a Contest between Armies: Essays on the Civil War Era* (2008). He is currently working on postwar adjustment issues faced by Union and Confederate veterans. **Look for a "Message from the President" in the Spring issue of the SCWH Newsletter.**

BOOKS IN REVIEW

Stephen D. Engle, *Book Review Editor*

Benjamin Franklin Cooling. *Counter-Thrust: From the Peninsula to the Antietam.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. Pp. 354. \$45.00.

Benjamin Cooling has provided us with a lively narrative of the military, political, and social ramifications of the pivotal months of July-October 1862 in the Eastern Theater. Picking up at the end of McClellan's Peninsula Campaign, Cooling examines the conduct and significance of all of the major and minor engagements that culminated in the bloodiest day in U.S. history along Antietam Creek.

In this welcome addition to University of Nebraska Press's Great Campaigns of the Civil War Series, Cooling offers an excellent synthesis of the best literature and inventive use of primary sources to provide a measured look at the complex events of these campaigns. Besides his lively recounting of individual battles, he also expertly weaves northern political developments into the narrative. Unfortunately, less attention is given to southern political events. Finally, Cooling provides fresh perspective on some of the more controversial events of these months, particularly in his balanced treatment of the actions of Fitz John Porter at Second Bull Run and his reassessment of the strategic importance of the battle of Chantilly. Both academic and popular readers will find the book both enjoyable and useful.

Jeanne Heidler, U.S. Air Force Academy

Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. Pp. 277. \$27.95.

In this revisionist study, Mark Neely challenges the long-held view of the conflict as a destructive war. He argues that the behavior of soldiers did not match the rhetoric upon which historians have too often relied for evidence and the true nature of the war was not as brutal as we've been told. He admits that the Civil War probably still stands as "America's bloodiest war," but his point that no other conflict counts the casualties from both sides is well taken. His argument for the role of race in acts of brutality is also insightful, as it was much more likely to be aimed at blacks or Indians than at whites. This controversial book will not be the last word on the subject, but serves as a useful rejoinder to the accepted interpretation of the war and deserves to be read and considered by all serious Civil War scholars.

A. James Fuller, University of Indianapolis

Orville Vernon Burton. *The Age of Lincoln.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2007. Pp. 420. \$29.95.

In his "Bibliographical Essay," University Distinguished Teacher/Scholar at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign, Orville Vernon Burton confesses that "*The Age of Lincoln* is the culmination of a scholarly lifetime of research and teaching" (p. 371). His long hours spent in the vineyards of the archives, challenging undergraduates in class, and training graduate students in seminars has resulted in a distinguished career for Burton, but also a first-rank historical work of synthesis and narration. This work presents a fresh and persuasive interpretation of the era of Abraham Lincoln, which Burton understands to run from the 1840s through the 1890s. Lincoln and Lincoln's values loom over that era, and Burton deftly walks the reader through his interpretation. He demonstrates how Lincoln's vision of what the country could be in terms of liberty and freedom, and infused with previous revolutionary ideals, became by 1900 something new, different, unexpected, and more than a bit foreign. Burton's purpose is to provide an overarching, big picture, synthesis of the nineteenth century, and he succeeded. *The Age of Lincoln* is a major achievement on its own, and a fitting achievement of one of the United States' most important historians.

Thomas C. Mackey, University of Louisville

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The Civil War in a New Age

(continued from page 1)

War historians, and all scholars, who learn to work with online sources. Some topics, however, may not be conducive to keyword search ability. Secondly, the speed with which research may be done online has the potential to shift research topics away from the monograph model to more of an interpretative synthesis. For Civil War research, where monographic depth is fairly deep, that could end up being beneficial should it generate more work in comparative and longitudinal perspectives.

The final speaker was Anne Rubin from University of Maryland, Baltimore County, who presented "Mapping Memory: Digitizing Sherman's March." Rubin's interest in the creation of digital media and her early work with the Valley of the Shadow project both intrigued and challenged her. Making the raw materials of history visually available to argue an issue for varied audiences required learning new skills and approaches. Rubin was drawn back to digital media as she became increasingly dissatisfied with online sites that remained fundamentally archival even as new technology surfaced. Rubin's current project uses digital media for the historiographical expression of historians' arguments or ideas. Sharing some of the pitfalls, challenges and opportunities available in digital media was the focus of Rubin's presentation.

Rubin's site, "Sherman's March on America, Mapping Memory," explores the ways that Americans have remembered, retold and imagined Sherman's march. Using a mosaic of sources and maps, Rubin's site explores the many myths and legends that have grown up around the march as a lens for understanding how Americans feel about the Civil War specifically and about war in general. With the central idea of a journey as her guiding metaphor, Rubin's five foundational maps each have fifteen to twenty identified points of significance. Users may toggle both between points on a map and between different maps to capture perceptual change over time and between people, places, and events.

Making the story visually interesting is technically challenging, but additional issues exist in preserving a historical interpretation for audiences with relatively short attention spans.

There are endless opportunities for historians in utilizing this media though pitfalls in digital media use abound. Learning how to use these technologies to expand the historian's reach to new audiences and to present new information is crucial. While many such sites currently exist, most are simply archival. The challenge is to be innovative in both the content and the technology.

—Debra S. Brown

Historians of the Civil War Western Theater to Meet in Nashville

The Historians of the Civil War Western Theater will meet at the Fort Negley visitors center in Nashville, Tennessee, on May 14-16, 2009. Contact John Marszalek at johnmarsz@yahoo.com (662-323-8068) or Mike Ballard at mballard@library.msstate.edu (662-325-7680-home; 662-285-6834-office) for information. The annual meeting in 2008 was held at Perryville, Kentucky. The fifteen members attending enjoyed meeting in a building on the battlefield near the visitors' center. Discussions were not confined to the battle, but included the strategic situation in the Western Theater that led to the Bragg-Buell conflict, significant Civil War historians' influence on our understanding of the Western Theater, and the present state of Western Theater historiography. The Shaker Inn a few miles from the battlefield served as hotel headquarters. For more, check the web at www.westerntheaterhistorians.org (Buck Foster-webmaster).

Laney Book Prize for 2009

The Austin (Texas) Civil War Round Table, Inc., invites entries for the Fourteenth Annual Laney Book Prize for distinguished scholarship and writing on the military or political history of the American Civil War. The prize is given in honor of Daniel M. and Marilyn W. Laney for their efforts to protect endangered Civil War battlefields. The \$2,000 for this award is provided by the Morse Foundation, whose labors on behalf of the ACWRT and battlefield preservation are gratefully acknowledged.

The 2009 Laney Prize will be awarded to the author of a book published in the calendar year 2008 that best advances the knowledge of the Civil War's military or political events and the Americans who took part in those events. The winning book will be announced by May 2009, and the author will appear as a guest speaker and receive the prize at the June 18, 2009, meeting. For consideration, please arrange to send four copies of your book to Austin Civil War Round Table Laney Prize Committee, c/o Vice-President Mac McKenzie, 413 Canyon Wren, Buda, TX 78610 (512-295-3698). The deadline for submissions is March 31, 2009.

The SCWH will host its second biennial academic conference at the University of Richmond, Virginia, in 2010. Members and non-members are welcome. For those interested, information will be posted at http://scwh.la.psu.edu/SCWH_conferences.shtml as it becomes available.

Civil War Historians Sought for *New York Times*

The *New York Times* is seeking the help of Civil War historians for their "Times Topics" Project. The "Times Topics" site is organized into about fifteen thousand subjects, which pull from past *NYT* articles to make pages that cover historical topics. Some examples include North Korea's nuclear program, the W.P.A., Pearl Harbor, and the 9/11 attacks.

While currently the articles included only go back to 1981, there are efforts underway to digitize the paper all the way back to 1851. This will allow "Times Topics" to show the *NYT*'s entire body of coverage. Eventually the staff would like to create fifteen thousand historical pages, and the first step toward this goal is to create several hundred Topic pages devoted to different aspects of the Civil War, creating separate pages on key battles, generals, political leaders, and subjects like slavery, conscription, and the development of ironclads.

The *New York Times* is looking for expert help in deciding what to select. If you are a Civil War Historian who would like to contribute, contact John O'Neil at joonei@nytimes.com for more information.

Dates to Remember

March 26-28: Sixteenth National Conference of the Society of Civil War Surgeons, Inc., will be held in Chattanooga, Tennessee. For more information e-mail socwsurgeons@aol.com.

April 2-5: Seventy-sixth meeting of the Society for Military History in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, hosted by Middle Tennessee State University at the Embassy Suites Conference Center. For more information, contact Derek Frisby at dfrisby@mtsu.edu.

Future Fall Meetings

November 5-8, 2009

November 4-7, 2010

October 27-30, 2011

November 1-4, 2012

Oct. 31-Nov. 3, 2013

Lexington, KY

Charlotte NC

Baltimore, MD

Mobile, AL

St. Louis, MO

Check out the SCWH webpage

The Society of Civil War Historians is now on the web. Go to the SCWH site at:

scwh.la.psu.edu/

Click on publications to see the newsletter and the journal. You may also go to Project Muse to find the articles included in the journal, *Civil War History*, on the web.