

[Lang on Gleeson and Lewis, 'The Civil War as Global Conflict: Transnational Meanings of the American Civil War'](#)

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David T. Gleeson, Simon Lewis, eds. *The Civil War as Global Conflict: Transnational Meanings of the American Civil War*. The Carolina Lowcountry and the Atlantic World Series. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014. viii + 308 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61117-325-3.

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The World of the American Civil War

The previous two decades have showcased a remarkable revolution in American historiography. No longer can scholars look exclusively at the national past within the protective and isolated confines of the United States' seemingly secure borders. While rich texts continue to focus on the national experience, almost all historians today accept that the United States never evolved independent of its connection to the broader world. Indeed, as Thomas Bender reminded us in 2006, the United States lived—and lives—as “a nation among nations” (*A Nation among Nations: America's Place in World History* [2006]). By linking American history to its hemispheric, Atlantic, and international pasts, the literature has uncovered extraordinary new insights into the studies of place and nation, slavery and abolition, revolution and restoration. Long burdened by an exceptionalist bent to its historical narrative—the notion that the United States had evaded the corrupting evolutionary tendencies of the Old World, charting altogether a distinct path of history—the transnational turn in American historiography has disrupted a sense of uniqueness to the national story.

Fewer places in the literature have experienced this historiographical transformation more than the field of Civil War studies. Long a product of exceptionalist writing, the United States' signal mid-nineteenth-century conflict was often written as humanity's most profound shift from premodernism immediately into the dawn of modernity. Such an unprecedented revolution, this older scholarship argued, irrevocably realigned the citizenry's relation to the state, brandished a kind of total war that foreshadowed the terrible conflicts of the twentieth century, and centralized the United States altogether. This exceptionalist veil suggested that no other civil conflict had been as bloody, had been as revolutionary, or had been as sweeping in scope as the United States' own internal struggle. Indeed, this was *our* war, just as American history was *our* past.

The transnational turn fundamentally altered how historians considered the American Civil War. A new wave of literature now places the domestic conditions of the conflict—why it came, how it was waged, and what it meant—alongside the United States' place in an Atlantic world embroiled in similar disputes over the meanings of liberty, democracy, and republicanism. Myriad nations in both the Old and New Worlds had already experienced the impossible problems of democratic-republicanism's fate, slavery's destiny, emancipation's promise, and the destructive power of modern

industrialized war. If anything, the United States came late to a party long underway.

And that is where David T. Gleeson and Simon Lewis's fabulous anthology comes into focus. Functioning at once as a tight synthesis of the transnational premise and as a departure point for new areas of study, the volume of thirteen wholly unique essays unveils the interpretative power of framing the American Civil War within its global context. The book's overriding purpose is to understand the war transnationally, but the editors and authors are careful to recognize the multifaceted ways in which a transnational history of a national event can look. The volume never strips away the commanding influence of the nation-state. In fact, the various authors acknowledge that transnational history is not necessarily *world* history. American history and the Civil War in particular were contingent on relations to the world, the international exchange of ideas, the efforts to demonstrate behavior acceptable to a global audience, and even fears of the world impinging onto the nation itself. The nation-state is very much alive in this book. But it, like all intricate and evolving systems, was subject to complex, complementary, and contradictory influences both from within and without its immediate orbit. What we therefore see is an event that is *simultaneously* domestic and global. The Civil War, the authors suggest, was not exclusively a local moment, nor was it an amorphous global occurrence. The world was connected intimately to matters in the United States, just as the United States erupted in war due to conditions nurtured by global dynamics.

The book unfolds as a broad series of meditations on the war's causes, its many interested parties, its conduct, and its consequences and memory. Edward B. Rugemer and Matthew Karp open the anthology, engaging the complicated antebellum connections that American abolitionists and slaveholders alike forged with the Atlantic world. Both authors conclude that the delicate evolution from slavery to freedom in the United States and in the Western Hemisphere played central roles in the formation of American identities on the eve of secession. Indeed, the United States' mid-century emergence as one of the world's few remaining slave societies—and unquestionably its largest—directly influenced how the 1850s developed at home, how slaveholders viewed themselves in relation to the nation-state, how American slavery related to a world increasingly hostile to human bondage, and how a post-emancipation United States differed dramatically from other former slave societies.

In dealing with the war itself, Hugh Dubrulle, James M. McPherson, David T. Gleeson, Alexander Noonan, and Niels Eichhorn all shatter the simple notion that “northerners” and “southerners”—esoteric identifiers that now carry such little meaning—cared most about the course and meaning of the conflict. Each author instead agrees that the world watched this war carefully, that diplomacy was shaped by contingencies forged on the field of battle, that Americans themselves practiced war in ways to legitimize their belligerency and to seek international approval, and that mid-century nationalism underwent a crisis over its very sources. One of the anthology's profound leitmotifs is the question of nationalism itself, its ingredients, and its meaning. The American Civil War was one of many nineteenth-century conflicts waged as a terrible, enduring struggle about nationalism as a mystical idea or as the ethnic makeup of a nation's people. Were all humans truly created equal, as European and Unionist liberals would have it, endowed with the capacity of democratic self-determination? Or, were nations conceived in the image of the Confederacy, a state built on racial and ethnic hierarchies that promised to secure liberty only for those of privileged classes? These various essays thus reveal that the fate not only of the United States but also of the Atlantic world hinged on answers to these questions. The Civil War was not the first nor the last

conflict imbued with these difficult dilemmas. But by the 1860s, the authors conclude, it was among the most recent to take up the same questions that had plagued the world in the long wake of the Enlightenment and the Age of Revolutions.

The conduct of the war itself depended on similar questions. Burdened with self-imposed exceptionalist identities, Unionists and Confederates worried whether their conflict would deteriorate into what Abraham Lincoln called a “remorseless revolutionary struggle.” A pair of essays by Aaron Sheehan-Dean and Jane E. Schultz demolish any argument favoring the old Civil War-as-total war thesis. As Sheehan-Dean explains, each belligerent embraced the limiting tendencies and careful restraints of international law in shaping policies of retaliation, surrender, and prisoner exchange. Both nations avoided the most brutal passions and truly merciless conduct that so often scar societies engaged in civil war. Schultz’s treatment of British nurse Florence Nightingale, whose efforts during the Crimean War transformed nursing into a formal profession, demonstrates that both Unionist and Confederate women envisioned themselves in roles similar to the English icon. Understanding wartime nursing to be a source of virtue and humanitarianism, but also as a gateway into women’s public professionalization, American nurses understood their wartime place as a testing ground for a new postwar world.

The volume concludes with a series of essays by Aaron W. Marrs, Christopher Wilkins, Lesley Marx, and a sizeable roundtable, which all deal with the problem of the war’s aftermath and historical memory. Similar to the war’s significant transnational revision, the postwar period is also undergoing profound reevaluations. The closing essays discourage, some more explicitly than others, the use of “Reconstruction” when labeling events in the wake of Appomattox. “Reconstruction” seems to impose a limiting quality to the boundless events that took place both in and outside of the United States, as the nation, hemisphere, and world grappled with the stunning changes wrought by Union victory and American emancipation. From uncertain diplomatic relations, to American efforts to annex Santo Domingo, and even to the powerful international processes of remembering and forgetting forged on the silver screen by *Gone with the Wind* (1939), each essay instructs that because it was an international event, the American Civil War created more uncertainties and fostered bolder questions than those that it answered definitively.

The anthology not only encompasses an expansive temporal scope but also touches on a prodigious array of subjects. Both of these qualities make the book truly worthwhile. In fewer than three hundred pages of text, more than thirteen authors explore their subjects with painstaking precision and careful comprehension. Each essay, written with brevity and confidence, models the finest type of historical writing. The proof is in the way the book is conceived and executed. There is little doubt that each of these essays will either revise existing historiographical debates or spawn new areas of inquiry. That is the mark of a fine anthology, and this one succeeds admirably.

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