

[Book Review: Way on Cooper, 'Approaching Civil War and Southern History'](#)

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William J. Cooper

Reviewer:

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William J. Cooper. *Approaching Civil War and Southern History*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019. 200 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-7058-8.

Reviewed by Bruce Way (University of Toledo) **Published on** H-CivWar (August, 2019)
Commissioned by Steve Bare (University of Toledo)

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Approaching Civil War and Southern History does exactly what eminent historian William J. Cooper—here serving as both author and editor—says it does in the preface. The reader will find ten of Cooper's previously published, save one, essays. The originals appeared in a variety of venues between 1970 and 2012. Editor Cooper provides both the brief preface and a short introduction to each essay.

The book's strong point comes through on almost every page. Whether a young scholar revising a senior thesis (essay 1) or an established figure delivering the Southern Historical Association's presidential address (essay 9), Cooper demonstrates an ability to posit a question, in all but one case, support his argument with meticulous research, and present his findings in lucid prose. His writing is authoritative and academic while at the same time accessible.

The breadth of topics and the time frame covered in the essays are expansive and impressive, indicative of Cooper's wide-ranging interests. They are also at the root of one of the book's limitations. Aside from common authorship of the ten essays, it is a bit difficult to determine an overall theme or organizational thread. What links together Jefferson Davis's efforts to find an effective commander for the Army of Tennessee in 1864 (essay 1), the South Carolina gubernatorial election of 1890 (essay 2), and southern Whigs' attempt to forestall a crisis over slavery's expansion between December 1848 and March 1849 (essay 6)?

If Cooper can be pinned down to an overriding interest, it would be southern political history and the impact of politics on secession. Three essays (5, 9, and 10) deal specifically with 1860-61. The arguments here have been developed into book-length studies but one point from the essays deserves emphasis. Slavery was the root cause of secession and war. Without slavery there would have been neither, but Cooper points out how slavery alone does not explain why the Deep South seceded in

rapid order following Abraham Lincoln's election, why the Upper South waited until after inauguration and a call for troops, and why the border states did not go out at all. He finds the answer in state politics.

Three of the essays (4, 7, and 8) were written as book introductions. The most recent was for volume 12 of *The Papers of Jefferson Davis* (2008) and is the least interesting of the three, which may be an effect of the time constraint, 1865-70, and Davis's own difficulty in finding a new purpose after the war. This is also the only essay entirely without notes. The other two were written for re-issues of older volumes. They hold up better as stand-alone essays and draw attention to works that have been ignored. Daniel Hundley's *Social Relations in Our Southern States* was, it appears, lost in the vocal and political animosity of 1860, its year of publication. Cooper points out that years later scholars have returned to Hundley for his admittedly sympathetic stance toward the South but nevertheless detailed description of class and racial distinctions. The 1991 introduction to Edwin Forbes's *Thirty Years After: An Artist's Memoir of the Civil War* may be the hidden gem. Thematically it is a bit of an outlier; however, it clearly suggests that Forbes's visual and written work should be familiar to students of how the conflict has been remembered.

Individually the essays range from pretty good to downright impressive, and most group toward the latter end of that scale. They do not read as well together; collectively, the book seems a bit of a mishmash. Perhaps the "could have/should have been asked" question is "why these 10?" Cooper has had a long, productive, and, one assumes, happy relationship with Louisiana State University Press. In this particular instance, the press might have served their, and the author's, interests better by suggesting an outside editor.

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