

This War Ain't Over: Fighting the Civil War in New Deal America

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This War Ain't Over: Fighting the Civil War in New Deal America, by Nina Silber. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. xiii, 232 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Sarah J. Purcell is L. F. Parker Professor of History at Grinnell College. The author of *Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (2002) and coauthor of a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt, she is working on a book about the politics of mourning and the U.S. Civil War.

Nina Silber notes in the conclusion to *This War Ain't Over* that she “began this work in the age of Obama and finished it in the time of Trump,” making it hard to avoid the idea that she means it to have particular relevance in today’s United States, when the ways that polarizing Civil War symbols like Confederate monuments can have (even deadly) political consequences, such as in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 (183). Silber focuses the book intently on how “Americans used a troubled past to navigate a complicated present” by adapting Civil War memory and symbolism to new national and cultural purposes during the Great Depression (1). Charting Civil War memory during the Great Depression reveals its extreme malleability and cultural power, both of which are part of why Silber’s insights remain relevant today.

The scholarship on Civil War memory has proliferated in the past two decades, but clear periodization of the cultural work of Civil War memory remains elusive. Silber’s previous work and books by David Blight, Caroline Janney, Robert R. Cook, Barbara Gannon, and others cover in fits and starts the field of post-1865 Civil War remembrance in Civil War memory, each emphasizing a different period of inquiry when Civil War memory made a mark on national life. Blight’s magisterial *Race and Reunion* (2000) remains indispensable, but it covers fully only the period up to 1913, and Blight’s further work picks up the story in the civil rights era.

This War Ain't Over fills what has been a gap in coverage of Civil War memory—that is, the 1930s and early 1940s—demonstrating that ideas about the Civil War helped many Americans shape their responses to the depression and the New Deal federal state. Not stuck in any particular paradigm about how cultural “memory” worked as the generation of Americans who actually experienced the Civil War was passing away, Silber concentrates on “how Americans across the social, political, and economic spectrum found a ‘usable past’ in the U.S. Civil War . . . how they shaped a history that often spoke directly to their present-day political concerns” (2).

In this brisk, engagingly written book, Silber charts the ways that disparate Americans used the Civil War to frame important engagements with contemporary issues, especially with federal power, during

the depression. Silber's chapters include analyses of artists, writers, filmmakers, government officials, monument builders, trade unionists, and scores of others, both black and white. She looks at how the Civil War—especially questions around emancipation—shaped the outlook of “New Dealers, Popular Fronters, civil rights activists, white southerners with pro-Confederate leanings, and anticommunists” (6). The book proceeds chronologically, tracing everything from how New Deal programs funded oral history interviews with formerly enslaved people to plays, murals, and novels that represented the Civil War and Reconstruction from a huge variety of perspectives. One interesting chapter analyzes the shifting public image of Abraham Lincoln in the United States and in a global context. By the early 1940s, the Civil War was increasingly mobilized as evidence of the willingness of the United States to fight fascism, causing discomfort to southerners and white supremacists who wished to downplay the comparison.

One of the most interesting insights Silber offers is that people of often opposed ideological views and social positions—as different as the NAACP and the United Daughters of the Confederacy—could mobilize support for their depression-era agendas by appealing to Civil War memories. Silber also argues that white Americans who suffered privation during the depression appropriated the memory and language of American slavery to articulate their plight—resulting in the downplaying of the true racism facing African Americans in the 1860s and in the 1930s and '40s.

Readers focused on Iowa history will find plenty of interest: New Deal programs headed by Harry Hopkins, Hallie Flanagan, and other notable Iowans anchor the first half of the book, and Silber includes several primary sources from Iowans describing their suffering during the depression. Civil War memory scholars must read this volume, as should those interested in the Great Depression but who are not necessarily steeped in the larger arc of Civil War memory scholarship. Silber is an agile, insightful scholar who writes without a trace of jargon.

Two Homelands: A Historian Considers His Life and Work, by Odd S. Lovoll. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2018. 256 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewer Mark Safstrom is assistant professor of Scandinavian Studies at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois. His writing on Scandinavian history includes “Writing History Together: Norwegian- and Swedish-American Historians in Dialogue” in *Friends and Neighbors? Swedes and Norwegians in the United States*, edited by Dag Blanck and Philip J. Anderson (2011).