



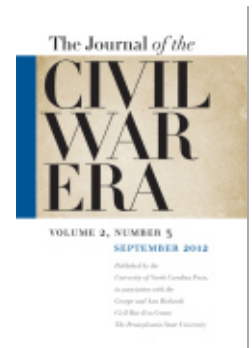
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Reading the Sesquicentennial: New Directions in the Popular  
History of the Civil War

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## Reading the Sesquicentennial New Directions in the Popular History of the Civil War

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DAVID S. REYNOLDS

2011, the sesquicentennial of the outbreak of the Civil War, initiated an outpouring of books about the war that is likely to continue for the next four years, each of which will surely be greeted by its own commemorative volumes. My favorite book of 2011 was *The Civil War: The First Year Told by Those Who Lived It* (Library of America). This collection of primary documents—letters, speeches, sermons, diary entries, and so on—brings alive 1861 in its chaotic immediacy. This volume reminds us that history in real time, as it's happening, has a raggedness and an unpredictability that are lost when its fragments are assembled into a narrative or marshaled under a strong thesis. Still, we all know that zippy narratives and thesis-driven prose are far more palatable than a collage of antiquated texts of varying literary quality. It has long been the role of popular histories to make complex subjects understandable to the average reader—or at least to history buffs. The test of an effective popular history is one that can be both readable and original. These days, originality can be most often found in books that analyze a familiar topic from a fresh angle or reinterpret it by bringing to bear previously unexplored contexts.

On the originality score, one of the most promoted books of the year, Tony Horwitz's *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War* (Henry Holt)—plugged in newspaper ads, serialized on *Bloomberg View*, and made the subject of a *PBS Newshour* segment—comes up way short. In his prologue, Horwitz tells us that he wants to put the abolitionist warrior John Brown back into his own time and consider him apart from today's terrorists. A worthy goal, but one that has been already achieved, in spades, by the cumulative scholarship presented in several previous books, dating as far back as Stephen B. Oates's 1970 biography of Brown, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, and Richard Owen Boyer's *The Legend of John Brown: A Biography and a History* (1973) and renewed in the first decade of the twenty-first century with Merrill D. Peterson's *John*

*Brown: The Legend Revisited*, Louis A. DeCaro Jr.'s "Fire From the Midst of You": A Religious Life of John Brown, Evan Carton's *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America*, Franny Nudelman's *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence, and the Culture of War*, writings by John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd, Robert E. McGlone's *John Brown's War against Slavery*, the ongoing research of Jean Libby and the Allies of Freedom, and my *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*.<sup>1</sup>

This huge amount of interest in Brown represents a tidal shift away from the time when he was banished to the outer limits of American history. Over the years, the reception of John Brown has been a roller-coaster ride. During the Civil War, Brown attained almost mythic stature among the Union troops, who tramped South singing "John Brown's Body." The North's veneration of Brown continued through the period immediately following the war, which saw the publication of Franklin Sanborn's hagiographic *The Life and Letters of John Brown: Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia* (1885), followed by Oswald Garrison Villard's more measured *John Brown, 1800–1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (1910).<sup>2</sup>

Respect for Brown never completely died out, especially among African Americans. W. E. B. Du Bois's concise, laudatory biography (1909) reflected his conviction that no white person in American history came nearly as close as Brown to identifying with blacks—a notion that a number of African Americans have since echoed.<sup>3</sup> In general, however, Brown's reputation plummeted during the 1890–1955 period. A number of Jim Crow-era historians relegated John Brown to the loony fringe of American history. This treatment reached its nadir in H. Peebles Wilson's *John Brown: Soldier of Fortune* (1913) and James C. Malin's *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six* (1942), in which Brown was said to be motivated less by abolitionist zeal than by a desire to kill and steal.<sup>4</sup> In *The Emergence of Lincoln* (1950), Allan Nevins described Brown as a neurotic afflicted by "paranoia" who should have been confined "in an asylum for the criminally insane."<sup>5</sup> C. Vann Woodward in his widely read essay "John Brown's Private War" (1952) also argued for Brown's alleged insanity, making much of affidavits testifying to insanity in Brown's family, especially on his mother's side.<sup>6</sup>

During the civil rights period, Brown began to gain more respect, a movement spurred particularly by Stephen B. Oates's judicious biography. Several recent books on Brown—especially those by De Caro, Carton, McGlone, and myself—challenge the timeworn view of Brown as a crackpot or zealot, grounding his abolitionism in sincere Christianity, ceaseless devotion to antislavery ideals, and a sympathetic identification with blacks

that was rare among white reformers of the time.<sup>7</sup> Some historians, especially those who concentrate on political history, are still unsure about how to integrate Brown into the picture of antebellum America. But this difficulty is being met by those who recognize how strongly culture can affect politics and how outliers like Brown and Harriet Beecher Stowe indeed had tremendous impact in their time—and meaning for our own time, too. Although we've not reached a consensus about Brown, more and more Americans are gaining an appreciative understanding of his unique qualities, especially his remarkably progressive racial views and his vision of a genuinely egalitarian America.

Horwitz dutifully lists current scholars in his bibliography, but he rarely cites any of them in his endnotes. At the same time, he doesn't shy away from distilling their hard-earned findings in his stripped-down presentation of Brown's life and the raid on Harpers Ferry. Much of what has been recently discovered about Brown, including his status as a Cromwell-like Puritan warrior, his relationships with other antislavery figures, his reception among northerners and southerners, and his meaning for Lincoln, appear in paraphrase in *Midnight Rising*, which is tailor-made for readers who want an easily swallowed John Brown—John Brown to go.

Horwitz complains that in his ninth-grade son's history book Brown is just a six-paragraph "speed bump for students racing ahead to Fort Sumter and the Gettysburg Address" (3). He aims to rectify what he considers this lamentable shortchanging. But six paragraphs in a ninth-grade textbook is not a speed bump. It's the LA freeway at rush hour, giving riders plenty of time to meditate on the slowly passing sights around them. I remember well my senior-year AP history book, back in the 1960s, which devoted a dismissive paragraph to Brown, who was still widely regarded as a homicidal madman—stinking roadkill on history's highway. Six-paragraph coverage in today's textbooks is actually a ringing testament to the fact that Brown is taken far more seriously now than he was back then.

If *Midnight Rising* were taken as the authoritative word on Brown, the Old Man would become roadkill once more—or, at best, a speed bump. Horwitz assumes a posture of neutrality. In his purported interest in ridding Brown of anachronistic connections to modern terrorists, he indicates that he wants to present the facts as they are and let the reader form his or her own opinion. But Horwitz's disdain for Brown comes through unmistakably. His Brown is not new: he is the shifty, bungling, apparently insane fanatic of long-ago history books. Brown had "poor judgment of personnel," Horwitz tell us—as though there was ample opportunity in the 1850s to sort through a field of candidates ready to join a dangerous mission in the South (84). Horwitz notes that Brown's northern supporters and

his own soldiers often quarreled with him about battle plans—as though anyone in that decade could envisage a sure military strategy against the South. (Lincoln, for one, said in 1858 that war was not even an option against slavery, which he then predicted might slowly disappear over the course of a century.) As for Brown’s plan to destabilize slavery by striking a southern region, freeing enslaved blacks, escaping with them to the mountains, and creating panic by raiding plantations from hideouts, Horwitz sees “manifest implausibility” in the scheme, even though it then seemed more plausible than any other plan, given the history of places like Jamaica and Haiti, where black populations had successfully driven out European colonizers by striking from mountain redoubts (239). Horwitz worries that, “through the lens of 9/11,” we may now see John Brown as a “long-bearded fundamentalist” and Harpers Ferry as an “al-Qaeda prequel” (3). He is right to worry about such reductionism, though 9/11, ironically, does help us to see that Brown’s invasion plan was not utterly absurd. The past decade has shown what can happen when a determined splinter group wages war from hideouts—how disruptive it can be to the status quo. Had Brown made it to the mountains before he was captured at Harpers Ferry, he too might have had a powerful effect on events—a positive one (unlike al Qaeda), since he aimed to free 4 million slaves.

To create a fast-paced narrative, Horwitz often uses the you-are-there journalistic techniques that had made his earlier book *Confederates in the Attic* (in which Horwitz joins Civil War reneactors) a best-seller. “John Brown, the Antislavery Entrepreneur” is the title *Bloomberg View* used for its four-part excerpt from *Midnight Rising*, a term less applicable to Brown, a notoriously maladroit businessman, than to Horwitz, a skillful John Brown-as-latter-day-Samson huckster. At several points in *Midnight Rising*, Horwitz supplies realistic details that he hopes will enliven John Brown’s world for the reader. He gives tidbits of new information about the personal lives of Brown’s men, adds some local color about Harpers Ferry, and includes minutiae such as the degree to which various hanged bodies quivered on the noose. Such details, though vivid, are part of Horwitz’s studied circumvention of a genuine reconsideration of Brown as an anti-slavery provocateur or as a pioneering spokesperson for civil rights. In light of the recent serious debates about Brown—not just in history circles and scholarly books but also in public venues such as the *New York Times*, classrooms, and History Day exhibits around the nation—what is now needed is probing analysis and interpretation, not a boiling down of Brown’s story to a page-turner aimed at the best-seller lists.

The flaws of Horwitz’s you-are-there technique are especially visible in his handling of the May 1856 incident in which Brown and his followers

killed five proslavery settlers in Pottawatomie, Kansas. One of the promotional blurbs for *Midnight Rising*, by Erik Larson, compares Horwitz's book to *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote's novel about pathological murder. The comparison, meant to favor Horwitz, unwittingly points up the way Horwitz's style interferes with a useful analysis of the Pottawatomie slayings. Instead of framing the incident by describing in detail the many proslavery atrocities that prompted Brown's vindictive act, Horwitz quickly summarizes some lead-up events, such as the Border Ruffian invasions and the Sack of Lawrence, and then assumes the perspective of Brown's victims. He puts us inside the cabins of James Doyle and his family, who are awakened by noises outside—a disruption that grows increasingly terrifying when Brown and his men rouse the family and summon three chosen victims outdoors, leaving the rest of the family cowering in fear as the murderous deed is performed in the distance. Horwitz uses the same storytelling device for his account of Brown's two other victims that night. This makes for lively reading of the *In Cold Blood* variety, but it fails to contextualize Brown, whose violent actions at Pottawatomie are comprehensible only if they are placed in the vicious cycle of the slavery wars in Bleeding Kansas between 1855 and 1858, a period when twenty-eight of the thirty-six known politically related murders were committed by the *proslavery* side. Brown, who saw slavery itself as a state of war, was answering violence with violence. A devout Christian who had once refused military duty on ethical grounds, Brown came to see that slavery was defended so militantly by its supporters that he believed that violence alone would end it—a belief that proved tragically accurate, though even Brown could not have foreseen the horrible bloodbath that would be the nation's only pathway to emancipation.

Like Horwitz's *Midnight Rising*, Adam Goodheart's *1861* (Alfred A. Knopf) and Amanda Foreman's *The World on Fire* (Random House) treat war-related topics that have been amply covered by previous historians. Unlike Horwitz, however, Goodheart and Foreman bring a certain freshness to their topics (the outbreak of the war and U.S.-British relations, respectively) because, instead of stripping down their subjects, they flesh out significant details that support their arguments. Goodheart's book, which comes with a jacket blurb by Horwitz, utilizes the you-are-there technique, but with more success than does *Midnight Rising*. To be sure, Goodheart sometimes lapses into the kind of semi-fanciful descriptions the technique entails. In one scene, about a black servant named Willis, Goodheart admits in an endnote that his account of Willis's daily duties is "in part conjectural" based on marginal evidence (391). Indeed, we sense a certain amount of guesswork and embellishment in several of the

scenes of this book, which recreates the first year of the war. But I find Goodheart's descriptions, as speculative as they sometimes are, generally credible and suggestive. The narratives Goodheart crafts—including ones about Maj. Robert Anderson at Fort Sumter; an aged Revolutionary War soldier visiting Boston; the young James A. Garfield in Ohio; Abraham Lincoln in Illinois; John C. Frémont's wife Jessie in San Francisco; and other Americans in St. Louis, Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C.—could be faulted as scattershot and disconnected, but behind the apparent looseness is a controlling thesis.

Goodheart adds nuance to our understanding of the start of the Civil War by assigning the North a larger role than is customary. The overall arc he follows is familiar enough. The victory of Lincoln, an antislavery Republican, in the presidential race of 1860 resulted in the South's secession, which immediately raised questions about federal property, especially forts, below the Mason-Dixon line. Despite much political scrambling to reach a compromise that would ease the growing sectional tensions, war broke out in April 1861 when Confederates in Charleston, South Carolina, bombarded Fort Sumter, which was under the command of Robert Anderson. Lincoln, though reluctant to go to war, was determined to preserve federal property and save the Union. In response to the Sumter incident, he called up seventy-five thousand troops. And so began a war that many on both sides thought would be short.

Goodheart gives us this well-known story but highlights certain scenes that allow us to see the war from unusual angles. In most accounts of the war, it is the aggressiveness of southern secessionists, who felt cruelly victimized and oppressed by the North, that triggered the conflict. In Goodheart's telling, several leading defenders of the Union come across as aggressive too. Goodheart agrees that Fort Sumter was a key flash point in the war, but not so much because of the Confederate attack on it in April as because four months earlier Major Anderson, a southerner who nonetheless was dedicated to serving the federal government, had made a daring nighttime move with his men from Fort Moultrie in Charleston Harbor to the less vulnerable Fort Sumter, where Anderson boldly waited for weeks, knowing that a southern attack would probably come. And Anderson was hardly alone in his staunch defense of the Union. Goodheart rewinds to 1860, when the North witnessed a groundswell of exuberant pro-unionism on the part of young men known as Wide Awakes, who mobbed city streets, wearing flowing capes, carrying torches, and waving banners with slogans like "No More Slave Territory," "The Pilgrims Did Not Found an Empire for Slavery," and "God Never Made a Tyrant or a Slave." Although the Wide Awakes were not radical abolitionists, they



opposed the South and its peculiar institution, and they helped generate popular support for Lincoln who, while moderate in his views, was known for his conviction that slavery was wrong and at odds with the ideals of the Founding Fathers.

By reframing the outbreak of the war in terms of Anderson's tough stand and the Wide Awakes' freedom rallies, Goodheart underscores the active role of the Union side in bringing on the war. Such contextual information helps us see more clearly Lincoln's firmness in the face of the rising storm created by the secession crisis. Lincoln confronted a cacophony of suggestions, criticisms, and bluster on all sides. Abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips considered him weak on slavery and were appalled by his defense of the Fugitive Slave Law and his endorsement of colonizing blacks abroad. In the opposite extreme, Southern fire-eaters saw him as a despicable tyrant and a Negro-loving fanatic whose main goal was to destroy the South. Then there were those in the middle, notably Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky, who tried to forge a deal he thought would prevent war. Crittenden came up with a six-point compromise plan that included a proposed constitutional amendment that would have preserved slavery forever if the South rejoined the Union, an idea that elicited hot-and-cold reactions throughout the nation and ultimately went nowhere. Lincoln, too, took a middling stance but, as Goodheart indicates, was no weak-kneed compromiser. His opinion on the day's major issue was that of the Republican Party platform: slavery could remain in place but must not be allowed to extend westward. Since Lincoln prized the Union above all and didn't recognize the legality of secession, he was unwavering in his commitment to protect federal property in the South. Therefore, even though some of his advisers suggested he surrender Fort Sumter to the Confederates, there was no question in his mind what to do when the fort came under southern assault.

Besides offering a picture of a tougher North than is customary, Goodheart gauges the early rumblings of war in different parts of the nation. He takes us to San Francisco, where the charming, outspoken Jessie Benton Frémont hosted gatherings of literati and politicians, some of whom helped to quell a Confederate plot against California. Goodheart also describes pro-Union activity on the part of German expatriates in Missouri, a slave state that would be an important arena of conflict during the war. Goodheart takes us to Chicago and Manhattan, where the colorful militia captain Elmer Ellsworth led parades of acrobatic Union soldiers known as the Zouaves, and to Fortress Monroe in Virginia, a Union stronghold where black fugitives, who came to be known as contrabands, arrived after having made daring escapes from their southern masters. The



contrabands inspired northerners with their courage and provided Union leaders with useful information about the southern army.

Some might complain that Goodheart does not devote as much space to southern locales and people as he does to the North. Indeed, it would have been useful to have an in-depth description of prewar goings on in a Deep South city such as New Orleans. But his emphasis on the North is a healthy corrective to the traditional story of the South's military action as being the primary catalyst of the war. The main questions that *1861* leaves me with are these: Where did all those northern Wide Awakes come from? What was their history? After all, the North had long been known for its anti-abolitionist, anti-black mob violence, which continued right up to the war and would be notoriously reprised in the New York draft riots of 1863. In Goodheart's discussion, the Wide Awakes, though not free of racism, had a strong antislavery tendency. Though Goodheart sometimes cast his glance back to the 1840s and '50s, I would have appreciated a more extensive explanation of the historical contexts of this remarkable group of freedom-loving northerners. But such an explanation would have just been icing on a very rich cake. In this stimulating book, Goodheart opens up new vistas of research that other historians will want to explore.

Like Goodheart, Amanda Foreman in *A World on Fire* goes outside the commonly described locales of the war, though she travels east, to England, not north and west, as does Goodheart. The antislavery toughness that Goodheart sees in the North is minimized by Foreman, who concentrates on the unstable, sometimes dangerously volatile relationship between the United States and England during the war. Foreign policy was not Lincoln's forte, and, perhaps understandably, Lincoln is not as large a presence in Foreman's book as he is in most histories of the period. Foreman creates a real sense of dislocation through her geographical reshuffling and her emphasis on British figures and foreign affairs specialists in Lincoln's administration, especially his secretary of state, William Henry Seward, his chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, Charles Sumner, and his ambassador to England, Charles Francis Adams. Foreman makes a persuasive case for the cantankerous Seward's important part in the war. In the tense period leading up to Fort Sumter, he became the main advocate of an improbable scheme to incite a war against foreign nations (including France and Spain and, he ruminates, possibly England and Russia as well) to drive them permanently out of the Western Hemisphere and thus create unity between the North and South, whose hostile feelings would then be directed not against each other but against a common enemy. At a public gathering, Seward boasted, "We will wrap the whole world in flames! No power so remote that she will not feel the fire of our battle and be burned

by our conflagration” (191). Seward’s war-mongering did not quite produce a world on fire, as Foreman’s title has it, but it did create tensions between the North and Europe. As a British mill owner declared, “The all engrossing question is will America be foolish enough to go to War with us. Many people think it will” (185). At one point, England actually strengthened its military presence in Canada in anticipation of an American attack there.

Although an international war was averted, the North’s troubled relationship with England affected the latter’s stance toward the Civil War. Officially, England assumed a position of neutrality. But it became deeply involved with both sides in the American struggle. To some extent, it felt a kinship with the North. Great Britain had abolished slavery throughout its far-flung empire, and it had long welcomed antislavery visitors from America, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had twice triumphantly toured England after her antislavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* created an unprecedented sensation there. At the same time, however, England was tied economically to the South, the main provider of cotton for its textile mills, and it sympathized with the South’s struggle for independence. According to the British writer William Michael Rossetti, expressions such as “I am a Northerner” and “I am a Southerner” were as common among English people as “I am a Liberal” or “I am a Conservative” (805).

Foreman shows that these divided loyalties were reflected in the fact that Great Britain provided soldiers to both the North and the South. England’s most visible—and controversial—aid went to the South in the form of ships built in England and used by the Confederacy to escape the North’s naval blockade of southern ports and to capture and burn Union merchant ships. Throughout the war, England was widely perceived in the North as an enemy because of these blockade runners. The North’s animosity against England was piqued especially by the havoc wreaked by two British-built ships, the *Florida* and the *Alabama*, that repeatedly attacked Union ships with deadly success. The North’s furor over the *Alabama* prompted Charles Sumner to reinvigorate William Henry Seward’s earlier plan to go to battle against England, an idea that Seward, the former militant, now tried to quash. It would not be until 1870, five years after the war, that America’s dispute with England over the *Alabama* affair was settled through diplomacy.

Foreman’s topic, U.S. foreign relations in the 1860s, was once relatively obscure but has been of great interest to historians ever since the publication of E. D. Adams’s *Great Britain and the American Civil War* in 1925.<sup>8</sup> Allan Nevins in *The War for the Union* (1959) wrote, “No battle, not Gettysburg, not the Wilderness, was more important than the contest waged in the diplomatic arena and the forum of public opinion.”<sup>9</sup> Several

of Foreman's arguments aren't ground-breaking. But the way she presents them makes her book a significant contribution to the field. Her goal, in her words, is to anchor "movements, forces, factors, and political calculations" in the "individual experience," as registered in the "vast material left behind by witnesses and participants in the field" (806). The author of the popular *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire*, Foreman possesses an impressive knowledge of the lives of the British aristocrats, diplomats, and journalists who play important roles in her current book. To capture the personal side of her international subject, she has combed the holdings of a large number of archives and special collections. She quotes with ease from a formidable range of journals, letters, memoranda, war reports, newspaper articles, and so on. She doesn't permit this primary material to interfere with the flow of her style, either; she keeps her own narrative voice admirably in control.

This is not to say that the book is a smooth read. If Horwitz in *Midnight Rising* gives us John Brown as fast food, Foreman in *A World on Fire* serves up international diplomacy as a multi-course feast that most people will want to sample slowly, leave periodically, and resume later. In this regard, she's on the opposite pole from a popular historian like David McCullough. McCullough's accessible, journalistic style thrives on varied sentence and paragraph length. In a typical book, such as *1776*, his paragraphs ebb and flow, expanding out to four, five, or six sentences in length and then recoiling to one sentence, and then back out five, and so on. Foreman's paragraphs tend to be long and fully packed, and one has to work to follow them. The reader sometimes loses sight of the larger picture. Still, for me, Foreman's density is preferable to the glibness of historians who write mainly with the market in mind.

Foreman occasionally leaves behind her international topic in order to keep us moving through the war. She uses flimsy rationales—a British journalist on the warfront, an Irish soldier fighting for the Union, and such—to linger over Civil War battles whose details are common knowledge. Still, who doesn't like reading about a Civil War battle? I, for one, am actually relieved when Foreman temporarily leaves behind the complex, sometimes tedious interchanges of ambassadorial drawing rooms or political fêtes and gives us a rattling-good description of Bull Run, Fredericksburg, or Chickamauga. Moreover, she portrays the naval battles of the war with an exactitude and fullness I haven't encountered elsewhere.

Foreman's transatlantic emphasis contrasts with the United States-centeredness of David Goldfield, who in *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation* (Bloomsbury) makes only passing mention of the international tensions that loom so large in *A World on Fire*. This reduced

attention to transnationalism should not be held against Goldfield, who undertakes the formidable task of surveying American politics, society, and religion between 1846 and 1876. Goldfield's announced purpose is to bring to the fore what he sees as a neglected phenomenon of these three decades: the importance of evangelical Christianity before, during, and after the war. This discussion of religion is a welcome addition to Civil War scholarship. Before the war, Goldfield shows, American Christianity was divided between the Puritan-based evangelicalism of northerners who saw slavery as sinful and the proslavery religion of the South, which invoked the Bible to defend that region's peculiar institution. The competing versions of Christianity fueled sectional tensions and nurtured the complex outlook of Lincoln, who famously noted that northerners and southerners read the same Bible and prayed to the same God. After the war, in Goldfield's telling, Southern religion was channeled into the ideology behind so-called Redemption, the South's euphemistic term for recovery from the wounds of war through a restoration of white supremacy and the marginalization of African Americans—an ugly prelude to the Jim Crow era. The North, meanwhile, entered Reconstruction energized by a pious resolve to exercise Christian justice to emancipated blacks, a resolve that wilted in the face of the increasingly this-worldly priorities of the Gilded Age.

Although this overall argument makes sense, Goldfield oversimplifies the religious scene. While his foregrounding of evangelicalism is justified, especially in light of the expansion of the Baptist and Methodist churches, there occurred during this period a fascinating splintering and diversification of American sects and denominations, exemplified by the rise of Mormonism, Seventh Day Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses, spiritualist cults, and early examples of New Thought (soon to yield to Christian Science) that don't factor into Goldfield's discussion.

But Goldfield's book, after all, is not a history of religion but a study of the relationship between mainstream Christianity and major shifts in politics and society, and, as such, it succeeds. Like Foreman, Goldfield goes well beyond his announced topic. He loses sight of his religion-based thesis, but, as with Foreman's work, this meandering quality becomes a strength, not a shortcoming. A dogged focus on religion would make *America Aflame* far narrower than it is. As it stands, the book ranges widely over the American scene, tracing the succession of major events of this period, including the Mexican War, the Compromise of 1850, the slavery crisis, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Goldfield cogently synthesizes much of what is known about this era and, on occasion, adds new information derived from primary sources. The result is a frequently perceptive history of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.

However, a disappointing number of errors and misreadings crop up. Goldfield cites Lincoln's alleged greeting of Harriet Beecher Stowe—"Is this the little woman who made this great war?"—without mentioning that it may be apocryphal (79). He goes so far as to say that Lincoln "read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and wept at Tom's fate"—something I'd like to believe is true, having recently written a book on the political impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but for which there's no evidence (85). (Lincoln, while known to be an aficionado of poetry, the Bible, newspapers, and Shakespeare was not a regular novel reader, and we don't know if he read Stowe's book.) Because Goldfield covers so much territory so swiftly, he occasionally skews chronology, as when he suggests that Stowe "first shared her anti-slavery essays" in a Cincinnati parlor setting; actually, her first anti-slavery writings appeared long after her parlor-writing years (75). Also, he wrongly says that at Pottawatomie "[John] Brown and his sons invaded the cabin of a pro-slavery family, dragged three men outside, shot the father through the head, and hacked and mutilated his two sons with broadswords," a statement that contains several errors, most notably the number of cabins raided (it was three, not one) and the number of men killed (it was five, not three) (118). Regarding Harpers Ferry, Goldfield takes the old, dismissive view that Brown's scheme to end slavery was "harebrained" and "farcical" and that at Harpers Ferry "nary a slave rallied to [Brown's] banner," a canard that Brown specialists such as Jean Libby and Hannah N. Geffert have definitively refuted (159).<sup>10</sup> Goldfield says that Thoreau uttered his famous words about Brown—"Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning perchance John Brown was hung"—on December 2, 1859, the day of Brown's execution; the words actually date from a speech Thoreau had given in October.

Goldfield's interpretations of certain historical documents and movements are disputable. He describes Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" as "the Rebel yell set to music," not mentioning that the song was based on the inspiring Union marching song "John Brown's Body" (208). He reads Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address as a wishy-washy conciliatory statement, when in fact it has a militantly antislavery edge, with its words about every drop of slave's blood produced by the lash being answered by the God-directed sword of the Union. To argue that "the war nearly broke Walt Whitman's heart" is misleading, since Whitman was, in a deep sense, renewed by the war, which he saw as a powerful storm that cleared the political atmosphere and revealed the capacity for heroism and self-sacrifice on the part of both northerners and southerners (376). Goldfield's notion that the war "discredited evangelical Protestantism as the ultimate arbiter of public policy" is simplistic, given the immense

political influence of evangelicalism, right up to today (360). It's a bit jarring to see the postbellum period dubbed "The Age of Reason"—Goldfield's signal of the North's embrace of science and technology after the war—not only because this phrase sounds like a throwback to the Enlightenment but also because irrationalism, in the varied forms of evangelical enthusiasm, paranormal sects, and widespread racist sentiment, was then alive and flourishing in America. Goldfield's statement "Northerners had docked the war at Lethe's Wharf" has a nice ring to it, but is it true (395)? The war haunted many northerners, including Walt Whitman, for decades. In his march through the mid-nineteenth century, Goldfield takes note of major social changes—particularly the rise of industrialism and the strengthening of the national government—but leaves out many aspects of the social and cultural contexts that would enrich the book.

The books reviewed here raise questions: Where is Civil War scholarship going? What direction is it taking? To me, the most interesting parts of the books under review are those where we see the authors reaching outside the usual pale of scholarship in order to register voices and perspectives that are absent from more traditional histories. Walt Whitman, for instance, is an important presence in Goodheart, whose book contains several chapters that begin with an epigraph from Whitman's poetry. Goodheart also reaches into cultural and social areas—parades, rallies, parties, private meetings, and so on—that provide interesting alternatives to the tired who-won-this-election and/or how-many-died-in-this-battle formula of some Civil War histories. Foreman, while not very attentive to culture, enriches her account of diplomacy with portraits of personalities, temperaments, and shifting moods that affected the international dialogues she discusses. Also, her scrupulous research unearths passing information that can be of use to other scholars. For instance, I was struck by a declaration she quotes by the Confederate leader William Lowndes Yancey, who lamented that in England "the anti-Slavery sentiment is universal. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been read and believed"—another confirmation of my argument in *Mightier than the Sword* about the far-reaching progressive influence that Stowe's landmark best-seller had in the nineteenth century (108).

This sesquicentennial period is an opportune one for historians to pursue cultural and social factors even more energetically. There need to be more books about the outliers of Civil War history—individuals who affected politics and events even though they weren't political or military leaders. Consider a few outliers who have changed the world. Think of the thin, persecuted man in India who led a march through his country and helped dislodge British imperialism there. Or the gentle woman in



Montgomery, Alabama, who raised America's consciousness by refusing to give up her bus seat. Or the nonviolent Baptist minister whose words at the March on Washington pointed the way to social justice. Or, on the negative side, think of the tiny, weakly armed band of Muslims that have managed to dangle the West on a string for over a decade. Outliers all, and yet, in their own way, as influential as any politician. Thoreau said that "a tide rises and falls behind every man which can float the British Empire like a chip."<sup>11</sup> The Civil War era offers many individuals—some known, others less familiar, and still others altogether forgotten—that merit further attention from historians willing to take the time to consider them.

As we go forward with our historical exploration, let's keep in mind Melville's inspiring comment about life in his essay on Hawthorne: "The trillionth part has not yet been said, and all that has been said, but multiplies the avenues to what remains to be said."<sup>12</sup> For historians, more and more avenues to original discovery are opening up yearly, thanks to the increasing numbers of primary materials that are being digitized and made available on the web. With instant access to many rare materials formerly available only in archives, we're in a better position than ever to explore the people and forces that shaped America.

#### NOTES

1. Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Richard Owen Boyer, *The Legend of John Brown: A Biography and a History* (New York: Knopf, 1973); Merrill D. Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002); Louis A. DeCaro Jr., "*Fire from the Midst of You*": *A Religious Life of John Brown* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Evan Carton, *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Franny Nudelman, *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence, and the Culture of War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd, *Meteor of War: The John Brown Story* (Maplecrest, N.Y.: Brandywine, 2004); Robert E. McGlone, *John Brown's War against Slavery* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 2009); David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Knopf, 2005). For the ever-expanding work on John Brown and his contexts by Jean Libby and the Allies for Freedom, see <http://www.alliesforfreedom.org/>.

2. Franklin B. Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown: Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia* (1885; repr., New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969); Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800–1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (1910; repr., Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1965).

3. W. E. B. Du Bois, *John Brown: A Biography* (1901; repr., London: M. E. Sharpe, 1997).



4. H. Peebles Wilson, *John Brown, Soldier of Fortune: A Critique* (Lawrence, Kans.: H. P. Wilson, 1913); James C. Malin, *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1942).
5. Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln* (New York: Scribner's, 1950), 2:92.
6. C. Vann Woodward, "John Brown's Private War," in *America in Crisis*, ed. Daniel Aaron (New York: Knopf, 1952), 109–30.
7. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*; DeCaro, "Fire from the Midst of You"; Carton, *Patriotic Treason*; McGlone, *John Brown's War against Slavery*; Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*.
8. E. D. Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1925).
9. Allan Nevins, *The War for the Union: War Becomes Revolution, 1862–1863*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1960), 2:242.
10. See especially Jean Libby, *Black Voices from Harpers Ferry; Osborne Anderson and the John Brown Raid* (Palo Alto, Calif. ., Jean Libby, 1979); Hannah Geffert (with Jean Libby), "Regional Black Involvement in John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry, in *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Staffer (New York: New Press, 2006), 165–79; and Geffert, "They Heard His Call; the Local Black Community's Involvement in the Raid on Harpers Ferry," in *Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown*, ed. Peggy A. Russo and Paul Finkelman (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 22–45.
11. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 7th ed., ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: Norton, 2007), B:2045.
12. Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," *The Literary World* (1850), in appendix to Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: Norton, 1967), 544.