

The Future of Civil War Era Studies:

Environmental Histories

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What does it mean to write an environmental history of the American Civil War? Must such a study incorporate graphic descriptions of devastated landscapes, forests ripped asunder by cannon and rifle fire, pastoral scenes marred by the blackened remains of barns, mills, horses, and cattle, cities bombarded and in ruins? Should it expound on the air and water pollution caused by millions of soldiers' campfires and bodily waste and on the contamination of soil by the leaden refuse of protracted battles? What of the reorganization of ecosystems, like those of the prairies and plains, into monocultural fields planted with wheat and corn to supply the massive Union armies arrayed against Confederate soldiers, ill-fed and ill-supplied because of their own society's monocultural predilections? The answer, in short, is no; but they could, and some already do. I hope that many in the future will, because such studies are far from complete. But environmental history has much more to offer Civil War-era studies than a catalog of the physical destruction caused by war and its related activities.

By positing that nature matters in history, that it has historical agency, environmental history provides fresh new language and insight into the debates about the war's origins, how and why it was fought, and what it means within the larger context of American and even global history. Scholars like Jack Temple Kirby, Ted Steinberg, Mark Fiege, Andrew Bell, Kathryn Meier, and Brian Black have already begun the conversation. Their work has elucidated nature's role in such diverse aspects of the war as strategic and operational decision-making, soldier health both physical and psychological, and the longer term implications of battlefield

commemoration.¹ There is a great deal more to say, however, regarding nature and the Civil War.

What follows is not my prediction for what is to come but is rather a collection of questions and suggestions that points to areas in need of study. I chose to address each major period within the Civil War era separately, even though their chronological boundaries are fluid and overlapping; I did this for ease of organization, not out of any sense of clear or needed separation between them. Indeed, a comprehensive analysis of the entire Civil War era is needed, though perhaps after more focused and localized studies have been done. After identifying potential areas for research in each category, I try to sum up what environmental history can bring to the field of Civil War-era studies as a whole. I imagine, even hope, that I will not have touched on every possible avenue for research and eagerly await the flowering of a dynamic new subfield.

Origins

The origins of the Civil War have yet to capture the attention of environmental historians beyond a glancing mention. One notable exception is John Majewski's book *Modernizing a Slave Economy*, in which the author suggested that the relatively poor quality of southern soils, further impaired by labor-intensive cash crop monoculture, led to the development of a political ideology that ultimately sundered the nation. He argued that the "link between secession and state activism was, quite literally, rooted in the land, or at least in how southern planters and farmers used their land."² Compelling though it is, Majewski's study stands alone in making this assertion; a great deal more needs to be done to flesh out this provocative argument.

Another aspect of the war's origins that environmental historians have touched on is westward expansion. Both Steinberg and Fiege have argued that the war was fought over

competing visions for the nation's social and physical landscapes. When the two sides clashed over access to the West's resources, political squabbling erupted into war. In each of these examples, the matter of the war's origins framed, but was not necessarily central to, its larger narrative and more research is required on the environmental implications of westward expansion within the context of the lead-up to war.³

Some questions we might ask: How did the race to control western lands, motivated in part by political and ideological fervor, affect that region's physical landscape? Conversely, how did the migration west affect the areas left behind, physically, socially, and politically? A major impetus for abandoning farms and moving west was declining soil fertility; did so-called fire-eating politics correlate closely with those areas where soil was most depleted? Did this create a sense of environmental vulnerability that led to radical politics and entrenched views on slavery? Did changes to the physical landscape shape the South's political and social culture, or, for that matter, the North's perceptions of the South, and did those material developments in turn lead to war? That is, can we find the roots of war in the soil, as Majewski suggested, or in the open lands of the West, as Fiege and Steinberg contended, rather than in the racial ideologies and constitutional debates on which Civil War scholars have focused for so long? Likely, the answer is a combination of both, plus other factors not identified here. I hope scholars with fresh new eyes will turn their attention to these issues.

War

The military conflict itself has been the center of environmental historians' forays into Civil War-era studies. This is perhaps not surprising, since armed conflict is often associated with environmental destruction and thus a likely subject of environmental analysis. However, the literature produced by these scholars has not been so narrowly or stereotypically construed;

indeed, the majority of their work has focused instead on nature's active role in shaping the war rather than on the war's impact on nature. Andrew Bell has shown how mosquitoes formed a sort of third army, one that carried disease instead of weapons. Kathryn Meier has argued that the physical state of nature before, during, and after battle influenced soldiers' mental health and morale, thus either inspiring or diminishing their battle effectiveness. Mark Fiege suggested that the limitations of the southern environment, due to either ecological or human processes, impelled Lee fatefully toward Gettysburg. My own work points to the ways ideas about nature shaped Union strategy at Vicksburg, in the Shenandoah Valley, and during Sherman's marches through Georgia and the Carolinas.⁴

Clearly, there are many more aspects of the military conflict to examine. Irregular warfare, for example, in both the western and eastern theaters provides ample opportunities for elucidating not only the role of nature in battle but also how ideas about what is wild and what is civilized affected conduct during war. Every campaign, and even individual battles, could do with an environmental interpretation. Skeptics might suggest that such studies would only confirm what we already know; that is, that the Civil War was fought *outside*, as one colleague good-naturedly pointed out to me recently. That is, in fact, the point—the Civil War took place in nature, where nature's forces held sway. The nineteenth-century military theorist Carl von Clausewitz acknowledged nature's role in warfare, pointing to it as a primary cause of friction, or uncertainty in battle, but studies that analyze that element of military conflict and explore what it means, rather than accepting it *prima facie*, are required.

Furthermore, the Civil War took place during a time of transition in the nation's environmental history, with implications for both the physical environment and for the range of options by which Americans operated within that environment. What did it mean, for example,

that the Civil War was the first modern war, the first to widely employ the tools of industry—railroads, rifled weapons, telegraphy, and steamships—to fight a war set in an arguably preindustrial landscape? From a logistical point of view, how did the modern processes of mass production—used to supply millions of Union soldiers with food, clothes, and arms—affect regional ecological systems? That is, how did mobilization to support the battle front affect the home front?

Finally, other wartime developments must be addressed. Secession and war enabled Lincoln and the Republicans to pass some of the most important environmental legislation in the nation's history: the Homestead and Railroad Acts of 1862 and the Yosemite Act of 1864. The first two divested public lands and their resources to private investors, individual and corporate; the third established the first national nature reserve, which would later become part of the larger Yosemite National Park. Environmental historians have studied each of these, but not within the context of the war. A comprehensive study of these and other wartime policies, both Union and Confederate, would reveal, I believe, the Civil War to be a watershed in the nation's environmental history.

Reconstruction

While environmental scholars have explored a wide variety of developments that arose between 1865 and 1877, to date none has published an analysis of the formal period of Reconstruction. The massive amount of legislation and sociopolitical change during those years merits a deeper look. Environmental analyses of attempts to engender land reform through the Freedmen's Bureau and the 1866 Southern Homestead Act, for example, would be fascinating contributions to the growing literature on the South as a region and into the ways race, economics, ideology, and environment intersect.⁵ Did these programs fail only for the political reasons often cited

(Johnson's race hatred or continued planter dominance), or did environmental factors contribute to their demise as well? Did the North's demand for raw materials—cotton, turpentine, and timber, among others—override any support for true land reform, or was the failure a factor of internal pressures based on economic needs, social conservatism, or even southern views of the role of nature in the region's identity and survival? Other questions to ask might be: How did demographic changes after the war affect southerners' approaches to management of the region's environment? Did they differ from the views of northerners who moved south to capitalize on burgeoning markets? In what ways did the expansion of industrial models affect specific ecologies across the former Confederacy? How did Reconstruction policies as a whole affect the North and the West?

Another avenue would be to examine how ideas of nature changed after the war in response to the material changes wrought by the conflict. Commemoration efforts that began even before Lee surrendered at Appomattox, for example, have had important environmental implications, as Brian Black has shown in his innovative work on the Gettysburg National Military Park.⁶ Though such parks did not become federal landholdings until after Reconstruction ended, most saw their origins in that period, with the ultimate effect of preserving nearly sixty thousand acres of prime land from either agricultural or industrial development. The underlying cultural reasons and overarching environmental effects of such commemoration movements deserves greater attention.

Final Thoughts

The ultimate benefit of applying the analytical tools and framework of environmental history to the study of the Civil War era is that through such research we gain a broader understanding of the conflict and of its role in shaping the nation's complex relationship to its natural

environment. We can see that the war was pivotal in that history, much as it was in the nation's political and social development. Furthermore, such studies are poised to remind us today that we live in constant negotiation with nature, even when it seems most removed from our daily lives. Americans who lived during the Civil War era witnessed tremendous changes to their physical environments, especially during the four years of military conflict, and their decisions and experiences reflected that. If we ignore that element of their past, we fail to understand a crucial part of our own history.

Notes

1. Jack Temple Kirby, "The American Civil War: An Environmental View," National Humanities Center, *Nature Transformed: The Environment in American History*, rev. 2001 <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nattrans/ntuseland/essays/amcwar.htm>; Theodore Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 89–98; Mark Fiege, "Gettysburg and the Organic Nature of the American Civil War," in *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of War*, ed. Richard P. Tucker and Edmund Russell (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2004), 93–109; Andrew McIlwaine Bell, *Mosquito Soldiers: Yellow Fever, Malaria, and the Course of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); Kathryn S. Meier, "'No Place for the Sick': Nature's War on Civil War Soldier Health in 1862 Virginia," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1, no. 2 (June 2011): 176–206; Meier, "Fighting in 'Dante's Inferno': Changing Perceptions of Civil War Combat in the Spotsylvania Wilderness from 1863 to 1864," and Brian Black, "Addressing the Nature of Gettysburg: 'Addition and Detraction' in Preserving an American Shrine," both in *Militarized Landscapes: From Gettysburg to Salisbury Plain*, ed. Chris Pearson, Peter Coates, and Tim Cole (London: Continuum, 2010), 39–58, 171–88.

2. John Majewski, *Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 16. See also Majewski and Viken Tchakerian, “The Environmental Origins of Shifting Cultivation: Climate, Soils, and Disease in the Nineteenth-Century South,” *Agricultural History* 82, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 522–49.

3. Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 89-98; Fiege, “Gettysburg and the Organic Nature of the Civil War.”

4. Bell, *Mosquito Soldiers*; Meier, ““No Place for the Sick”” and “Fighting in ‘Dante’s Inferno’”; Fiege, “Gettysburg and the Organic Nature of the Civil War”; Lisa M. Brady, *War upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

5. Kimberly K. Smith addressed these issues in passing in her book *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 69–72.

6. Black, “Addressing the Nature of Gettysburg.”