



The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War ed. Brian Allen Drake.

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Ask anyone where the American Civil War was fought and the answer will include various battlefields, oceans, regions, rivers, and states. For the essay authors of *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green*, such responses are at best incomplete, at worst incorrect. As one contributor sardonically observes, “the American Civil War was largely fought outdoors” (16). The book is a sampler of current scholarship on the complex interaction of humans and nature during the Civil War. It gathers essays on agriculture, climate and weather, disease, out-of-the-way locales, and perceptions of nature. As editor Brian Drake (Univ. of Georgia) explains in his introduction, the volume grew out of the Un-Civil War conference at Athens, Georgia, in October 2011, “the first academic history conference dedicated wholly to [the interaction of environmental and Civil War history]” (6). As Timothy Silver puts it, “rain and mud, horses, mules, hogs, cattle, mosquitoes and measles, are as much a part of Civil War history as Johnston, Pender, Lee, and McClellan” (64).¹

In the first of the book’s ten essays, “Fateful Lightning,” Kenneth Noe (Auburn Univ.) argues that historians have neglected the profound effect of climatic conditions on the war. In the early 1860s, El Niño weather patterns affected crop lands in both the North and South. Northern wheat producing states enjoyed higher yields of grain to feed both their civilian population and a hungry Union army of 2.5 million men. Noe contends that the success of northern farmers has wrongly been attributed principally to advances in mechanization. The situation was different in the southern states, which picked “one of the worst possible moments in the nineteenth century to launch an agricultural republic” (21). Cold, wet springs; hot, dry summers; cool, wet falls; and early, cold winters degraded the Confederacy’s agricultural capacity, leading to a crisis in 1864. El Niño influenced battles as well. Noe demonstrates that “roughly four out of ten [battles] were shaped significantly by inclement weather” (24). Like most of the articles in *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green*, this one points to a promising area for further new research.

In essay 2, “The Difficulties and Seductions of the Desert,” historian and journalist Megan Kate Nelson examines the desert warfare in faraway New Mexico because “in the southwestern territories ... we see the power of the landscape to shape human action in its most extreme form” (47). She concentrates on the surrender of Fort Fillmore in July 1861 and the Union forces’ disastrous retreat north across the desert under the command of Maj. Isaac Lynde. Nearly 20 percent of his column, including women and children, perished in the intense heat. “The evidence,” Nelson writes, “also suggests that

1. Those familiar with the book’s subject area will recognize the names of several essay authors for their previous work: e.g., Lisa M. Brady, *War upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War* (Athens: U Georgia Pr, 2012); Kathryn Shively Meier, *Nature’s Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2013); Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: U Georgia Pr, 2012); Aaron Sachs, *Arcadian America: The Death and Life of an Environmental Tradition* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2012); and Drew Swanson, *A Golden Weed: Tobacco and Environment in the Piedmont South* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2014).

Lynde was suffering from desert-induced afflictions that hampered his ability to lead his troops effectively” (44). It was a Pyrrhic victory for the Confederates. After the Union army captured their supply columns at Glorieta pass in 1862, the rebels abandoned Santa Fe. A third of their forces then died en route to San Antonio. The desert decisively triumphed over both armies in this remote theater of the war.

A community or region did not have to lie in the direct path of the armies to be dramatically affected by the war. Timothy Silver (Appalachian State Univ.) shows, for example, that in Yancey County, North Carolina, “the war’s most immediate effect on the ... environment was to empty county fields of some of their most visible organisms, namely white men” (54). The diversion of as much as half the white male population of the South into the Confederate army shattered the vital rhythms of agriculture, a problem exacerbated by El Niño. Pools of standing water after heavy rains bred mosquitos that spread malaria and other serious diseases. Unreliable roads, inflated prices, and the Union blockade deprived Yancey County of essential supplies of, among other commodities, salt to preserve food. Men in the local regiments endured the same ravages of insects and gnawing hunger far from home. By 1864, the Confederacy was in the throes of a food crisis, and the situation in Yancey County was particularly acute.

Kathryn Shively Meier (Virginia Commonwealth Univ.) discusses straggling in essay 4, “The Man Who Has Nothing to Lose.” She sheds light on this little understood but common practice usually attributed to simple cowardice. Heat, humidity, insects, and dirty, pestilential camps bedeviled soldiers in both armies. Since authorized leaves were almost nonexistent for common soldiers, they often left their units and joined the great mass of men trailing the armies. Others “straggled” just to find potable water, a fresh meal, a small dose of freedom, relief from the stench of their camps, or to evade doctors more lethal than the ailments they treated. As much as a fifth of the army was away on some sort of self-proclaimed leave at any given time. But, in the end, straggling could be beneficial, as soldiers returned somewhat rejuvenated and with their spirits restored. Meier concludes that “Deprived of resources and exposed to the bitter onslaughts of nature, common soldiers cast aside fears for their reputation and safety. Straggling to escape the clutches of death was well worth the risk” (89).

Aaron Sachs (Cornell Univ.) argues in essay 5, “Stumps in the Wilderness,” that the Civil War marked an underappreciated step in the United States’ environmental movement: “Whatever the flaws in America’s wilderness preservation movement, it does seem possible to make the argument that the war helped spur its rise, and ... helped move Americans toward conservation—the more efficient and careful use of natural resources, especially trees” (103). Scarred and wounded landscapes mirrored the collective human suffering of the war: thus, for example, forests cut down to stumps poignantly symbolized the many soldiers disfigured in battle.² “After the Civil War, the American relationship to the environment could never be the same” (108).

In essay 6, “The Strength of the Hills,” John Inscoe (Univ. of Georgia) analyzes J.T. Trowbridge’s novel *Cudjo’s Cave* (Boston 1864) to show that contemporaries equated higher physical elevations with a correspondingly superior moral climate. “The Civil War made that linkage even more inextricable, as it imposed upon the highlands a sense of moral geography that few other parts of the South could claim. For this war and these people, the wilderness was very much an active player. As for so many highlanders themselves, any claims to its neutrality proved futile” (137). Military historians should find Inscoe’s brief description of interest. Rocky, wooded, and replete with numerous caves, the Appalachi-

2. See, further, Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2013), and Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (NY: Knopf, 2008).

an theater of the war, like New Mexico's desert, offered an ideal refuge for insurgents to elude pursuing superior forces. But the Appalachian wilderness, unlike the inhospitable desert, provided safe haven for Southern Unionists, AWOL Confederate soldiers, Union soldiers escaped from POW camps, and fugitive slaves.

In essay 7, "Nature As Friction," Lisa Brady (Boise State Univ.) uses Carl von Clausewitz to show how natural events could significantly hinder commanders on the battlefield: "applying [his] definition of friction to nature, as well as to the human individual, allows us to understand the history of war in promising new ways" (149). Three case studies of early operations in the Western theater illustrate how commanders reacted to the curious phenomenon of acoustic shadows as a form of friction: these natural sound barriers muted the din of nearby battles. At Fort Donelson, Gen. Ulysses Grant overcame acoustic shadows by aggressively driving forward, but he failed shortly thereafter at Iuka, Mississippi, because he lost communication with his uncoordinated commanders. If Grant's record was mixed, Gen. Don Carlos Buell's string of failures, culminating at the Battle of Perryville cost him his career—"In this instance of acoustic shadow, nature created a point of friction that Buell simply could not overcome" (159).

In essay 8, "War is Hell, so Have a Chew," Drew Swanson (Wright State Univ.) describes how the Union blockade benefited bright leaf tobacco farmers of the Virginia Piedmont by sealing off foreign competitors and rapacious Yankee middlemen. The soil was ideal for tobacco, but ill-suited to food crops. Prosperous tobacco farmers resisted the Confederate government's efforts to transform the region into the breadbasket of the South.³ This had long-term consequences for both social relations and the ecology of the region. Increasingly pushed into tenant farming contracts or work in local factories, freed blacks could not share in the prosperity of their white neighbors. Swanson observes that freedmen—20 percent of the population—owned only 4 percent of the land. By the 1930s, decades of monocrop farming of soil drained of all nutrients left once flourishing farmers deeply in debt.

While the Piedmont emerged from the war in better shape, the same can not be said of the land Gen. William T. Sherman's "bummers" devastated on their march to the sea in 1864. Essay 9, "Reconstructing the Soil," by Timothy Johnson (Univ. of Georgia), concerns the new farming techniques and social relations that developed in the postwar South: "the path of Sherman's last great campaign [was] the nation's proving ground for a new era of chemical-intensive agriculture that remains the standard today" (192). Cotton farmers throughout the South relied on chemicals to increase productivity of severely damaged fields and a new agricultural regime was born. The ecological revolution had socioeconomic consequences as well. Purchasing necessary but expensive fertilizers helped confine black tenant farmers to debt serfdom and reduced white farmers to borrowing on credit to purchase the costly fertilizers for the upcoming season. "If owning slaves had been the key to wealth before Sherman came, "it seemed that selling fertilizer was the best opportunity after he had passed" (203).

Although the Civil War was the first conflict in which railroads played a critical role, for the overwhelming majority of men on both sides, the main mode of transportation was their own two feet. Mart Stewart (Western Washington Univ.) explores this underappreciated circumstance in essay 10, "Walking, Running, and Marching into an Environmental History of the Civil War." Walking was more than a way to get from one point to another. For pioneer naturalists like Gilbert White, John Audubon, John and William Bartram, and John Muir, walking was an ideal method of witnessing and experiencing nature.⁴ They walked hundreds, even thousands of miles. In wartime, soldiers, of course, matched

3. Piedmont farmers prospered again as the cigarette industry boomed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

4. See W.F. Bade, ed., *John Muir, A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916). Muir began his journey in September 1867.

that mileage in long campaigns or in hiking home on a rare leave. Guidebooks helped soldiers identify plants and animals, not only for mere love of natural beauty and splendor: “Walking through nature was not an occasion for reflecting on it,” Stewart writes, “but more often an effort to eat it” (214). In a section on runaway slaves, he stresses that successful escapes required detailed knowledge of the terrain and environment to be traversed. Finally, he contends that the grinding routine of marching “taught soldiers to move differently in the landscape, and to think differently about it at the same time” (219). Since soldiering bore similarities to regimented factory work, Southerners who believed their red-blooded men of the backwoods could easily outfight pasty-faced mechanics of the North soon learned otherwise.

The scholarship throughout this anthology is both rigorous and innovative. The essays invite students of the American Civil War to consider the relevant environmental conditions that shaped the daily lives of those who fought it. In his witty epilogue, “Waving the Muddy Shirt,” Paul Sutter (Univ. of Colorado) remarks that “The point ... is not merely that ‘nature mattered’ to the Civil War, though in every imaginable sense of that phrase it clearly did. It is, rather, that environmental history can be a powerful way of rethinking the very *matter* of the war, its lived material realities, and their formative relation to that roiling ideological formation that we call nature” (234).