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Hot off the Press: War Matters Review

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Abstract

This collection of essays illustrates that a material culture approach to the past can help us better understand some of the deeper complexities of the Civil War era, such as the expansion of consumer culture, the common soldier's experience, and behavioral history, as well as issues of race, bondage, and emancipation. Cashin argues that it is important to study the objects featured within the book to understand their multi-valenced roles in the daily lives of 19th-century Americans, as well as the cultural and emotional significance they held for those who utilized them. From Robert Hicks's essay on vaccinating the Confederate armies, to Sarah Jones Weicksel's examination of shelter in refugee camps, these pieces explore a wide assortment of artifacts. The authors reveal that these artifacts enabled historical actors to shape events in specific ways and give meaning to their surrounding world. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

War Matters, material culture, civil war era, review

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Hot off the Press: War Matters Review

by [Cameron Sauers '21](#)

War Matters: Material Culture in the Civil War Era

Ed. Joan Cashin

University of North Carolina Press

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\$29.95

This collection of essays illustrates that a material culture approach to the past can help us better understand some of the deeper complexities of the Civil War era, such as the expansion of consumer culture, the common soldier's experience, and behavioral history, as well as issues of race, bondage, and emancipation. Cashin argues that it is important to study the objects featured within the book to understand their multi-valenced roles in the daily lives of 19th-century Americans, as well as the cultural and emotional significance they held for those who utilized them. From Robert Hicks's essay on vaccinating the Confederate armies, to Sarah Jones Weicksel's examination of shelter in refugee camps, these pieces explore a wide assortment of artifacts. The authors reveal that these artifacts enabled historical actors to shape events in specific ways and give meaning to their surrounding world.

In her own essay, Cashin focuses on the relationship Civil War soldiers had with artifacts from the American Revolution. She specifically notes southern whites' veneration of Revolutionary War artifacts and their desire to protect them from Union soldiers. Union soldiers were eager to find jewelry and cuts of wood from Founding Fathers as they campaigned, items that were valuable to them but were also easy to physically carry. Cashin argues that soldiers wanted physical contact with these artifacts to serve as second-hand connections to great figures, especially George Washington, which would serve as inspirational reminders of the past, as well as mementos that could be taken away as souvenirs of war. Cashin's essay ends with a sentence that sets up this new subfield of historical scholarship: "The study of material culture can illuminate yet other undiscovered aspects of politics and memory in the long sweep of American History."

Two other essays in the collection that complemented each other were Earl Hess's, "The Material Culture of Weapons in the Civil War," and CWI Director Peter Carmichael's, "The Trophies of Victory and The Relics of Defeat: Returning Home in the Spring of 1865." While exploring different aspects of the soldier experience, both pieces cover the

tenuous relationship that many Civil War soldiers had with their weapons during the war. Hess explores the ambivalence that soldiers felt toward their guns and the act of shooting them. Some Civil War soldiers were petrified by the power of their rifles, realizing that the weapon purposefully took the life of an enemy or could accidentally discharge into a comrade. For other soldiers, America's emerging gun culture made them supremely confident in the handling and use of small arms while campaigning. Carmichael discusses how rifles and other militaria carried heightened symbolism during the Confederate surrender at Appomattox. Some Confederate soldiers were so grief-stricken, or in denial, over the Confederacy's demise that they could not bring themselves to personally surrender their weapons. Instead, they simply left their weapons in their tent and walked away rather than face the indignity of handing over these much-desired trophy pieces to Union victors. Enlisted men felt that the surrender of their weapons encroached on their personal honor because the decision to surrender was not theirs.

For casual buffs or serious scholars, *War Matters* is a rewarding read. Each author reconstructs the physical and symbolic importance of objects for readers. Moreover, the authors give voice to different human stories and the material objects through which individuals made sense of their world. The more we understand the artifacts themselves, the more we understand the people who used them. As the contributors to *War Matters* successfully showcase, material culture is an important complement to traditional history. Cashin and the contributors to the volume illuminate new subjects and provide another layer of understanding to the construction and unpacking of historical narratives.