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SOME RECENT BOOKS ON THE CIVIL WAR

By Mark E. Neely, Jr.

Keeping up with the surging output of books on the Civil War now seems all but impossible. I know that I have not been able to. At that, I probably enjoy more opportunity than many of *Lincoln Lore's* subscribers to read the latest books, and I thought a description of some developments in the field might prove useful for people who share an interest in the subject but must spend some of their lives at tasks

other than reading books on the war. This will constitute a "partial" account in every sense: I have read only a part of the books published in recent years and I am partial to some I've read more than to others. The oldest book I'll describe here was published in 1979; most of the volumes under discussion appeared in the last five years.

The most striking theory advanced in the new literature on the Civil War is what I call "The Theory of Self-Emancipation." It gained broad exposure in the book that accompanied the recent PBS television documentary on the war. Most of that book, called *The Civil War*, was written by



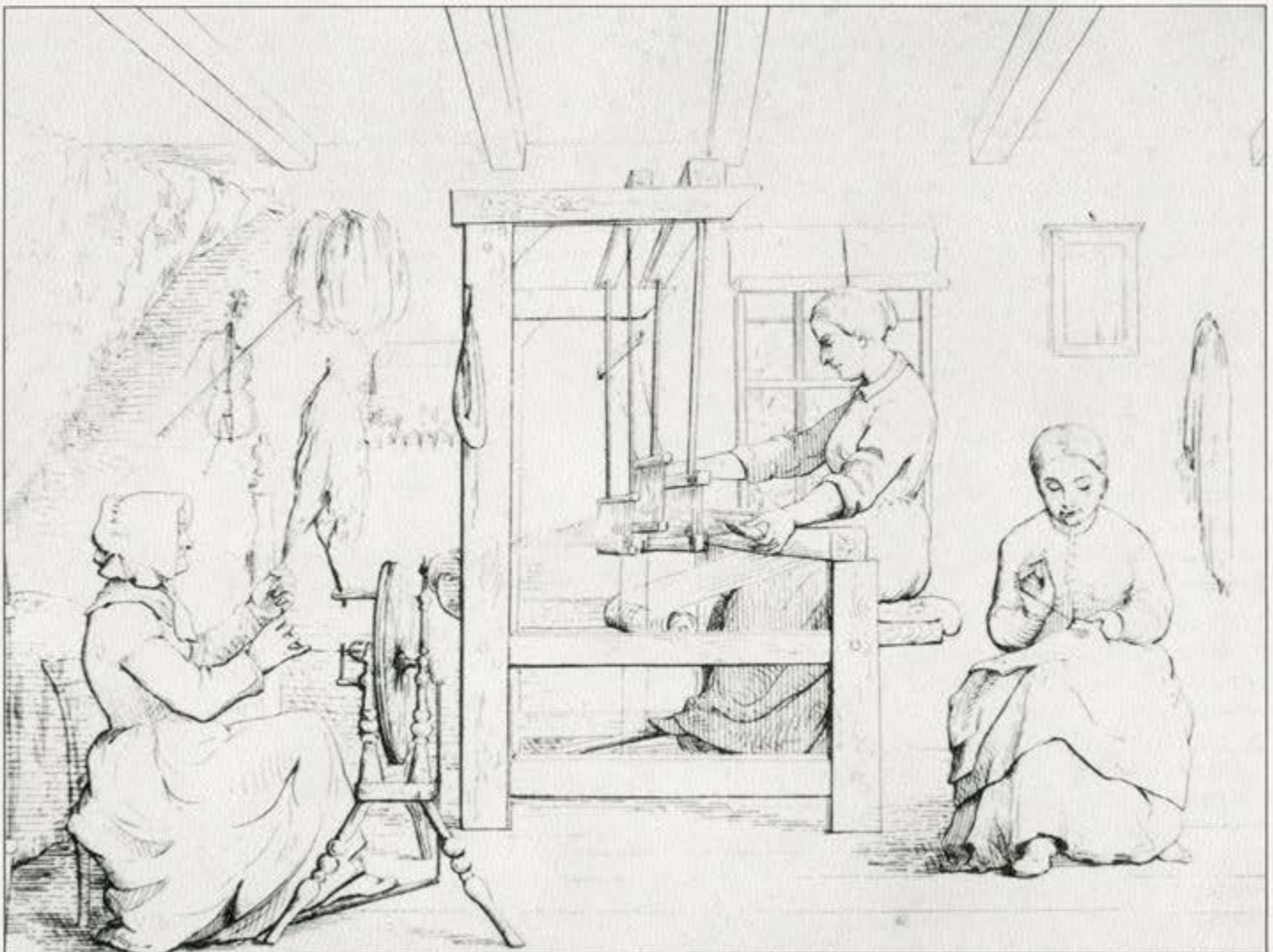
"Coming into the lines," an 1876 etching by Edwin Forbes based on his own eyewitness sketch drawn during the Civil War.

Geoffrey Ward with the help of the television producers, but other prominent writers also contributed brief sections on special topics. Among those was Professor Barbara J. Fields, of Columbia University, who, in a four-page essay, asked "Who Freed the Slaves?" Her answer? The slaves themselves.

Fields' essay in *The Civil War* is short and her statement of the case may therefore be more extreme than it might be with more room for qualification and nuance. But it is based on broad research reported on with greater restraint in Fields' earlier book, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century*. Her summary of the theory of self-emancipation broadcasts a message that was developed not only by her own research but also by the deep digging of others in the sources. Perhaps the first step in the direction of this theory was taken by Leon F. Litwack, whose book, *Been in the Storm So*

Long: The Aftermath of Slavery, published in 1979, asked not how the Civil War affected black people but how black people affected the war. This fresh approach to an old problem gained an institutional base at the University of Maryland in the 1980s where the Freedmen and Southern Society Project oversees publication of "The Documentary History of Emancipation." The two hefty volumes published to date, *Freedom...Series II: The Black Military Experience* and *Freedom...Series I, Volume I: The Destruction of Slavery* (yes, series II did perversely appear before series I), offer over 1,500 pages of evidence by which you can judge the validity of the theory yourself.

My own view is that, although the extreme statements of the case are absurd and the belittling descriptions of Lincoln that accompany them are gratuitous, the theory does contain a vital kernel of truth: legalistic documents (like the Emancipation Proclamation) written by white men in Washington



Rediscovered by the New Social Historians, these diligent Southern women appear to defy those historians who find Confederate nationalism inadequate to command sacrifice.

were essential to freedom but did not actually free black people on plantations in the Confederacy. To realize the freedom offered in that document, a slave usually had to seize the initiative himself, take the risk of leaving the plantation, and hazard recapture, brutal punishment, starvation, and exposure to the elements. Tens of thousands of slaves did take action, and a century of writing on the Emancipation Proclamation failed to make us aware of these myriad acts of anonymous individual courage. We owe a debt to Litwack and Fields and the others who have mined the archives for these inspiring anecdotes of freedom. By taking the focus away from the proclamation itself, however, at a time when it is much in need of a careful book-length analysis, they have not served the needs of political history well at all.

Thus in the realm of black history, one can see the impact of "The New Social History" on Civil War studies: the spotlight has been taken off Abraham Lincoln and put on the masses of black people. The influence of this approach to historical research has not been felt as strongly on other Civil War subjects. Indeed, the field has appeared so resistant to this trend (that is sweeping other areas of study) that a recent essay by Maris Vinovskis asked "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War?" They clearly have not, and they have offered valuable studies of women during the war as well as specialized local studies such as *Mastering Wartime: A Social History of Philadelphia during the Civil War* by Matthew Gallman, *The New York City Draft Riots* by Iver Bernstein, and *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri* by Michael Fellman. In general, though, the home front still remains a great underdeveloped territory for enterprising Civil War historians.

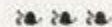
If the social historians have not yet won the Civil War, they have apparently succeeded in vanquishing the political historians. The election of 1864, the Democratic party and its leaders, the state governments, wartime voting, and many related political subjects cry out for study. The political history of the Civil War seems almost dead.

By contrast, the writing of Confederate history, despite its seemingly unfashionable nature in these times, continues to thrive. Because of the persisting cultural differences between North and South and because of the peculiar way the historical profession is organized in America (the Southern Historical Association is a separate organization), Confederate history sometimes seems a self-contained field. To be sure, the new social history has been felt in Dixie, but leaving that impact aside, I find that a major current preoccupation of writers of Confederate history is Confederate nationalism. At least four recent books are seriously engaged with that subject: Drew Gilpin Faust's *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, Emory Thomas' *The Confederate Nation*; Richard Beringer, Herman Hattaway,

Archer Jones, and William N. Still, Jr.'s *Why the South Lost the Civil War*, and Gaines Foster's *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South*. These works ultimately depict Confederate nationalism as weak, divided, and of tardy manufacture, and some of them, at least, say this weakness caused Confederate defeat.

The explanation hardly seems compelling. When Lincoln faced secession the government's census takers supplied him with an estimate of the number of white men of military age in the southern states: it was 1,116,000. Although Confederate statistics are poor, some sources estimate the total number of men the Confederacy put in arms by 1865 at 1,000,000. Even at 900,000, the mobilization would be impressive; at the higher figure, it would be, simply, complete (allowing for the disabled and a few men in essential jobs behind the lines). Of those mobilized, 250,000 died in the war. Such a death rate would not be tolerated by any twentieth-century, Western, industrialized nation, and it is difficult to find Confederate nationalism in any way inadequate when it could apparently inspire such sacrifice. Long-lived nations have been formed with a much smaller willingness to spill blood — Italy, for example. The problem of the Confederacy was not so much inadequate nationalism as the fact that the diplomatic circumstances were not right to produce an ally to play the role France did in the American Revolution or the Risorgimento.

(To be continued)



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NEWS FROM THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN ASSOCIATION

With this edition of *Lincoln Lore*, the Abraham Lincoln Association (ALA) of Springfield, Illinois, begins on these pages a quarterly report of its activities. The bulletin is designed not only to reach members of the ALA — for whom this page becomes the association's first newsletter — but also to inform subscribers of *Lincoln Lore* about ALA activities. Readers are invited to join the ALA (membership information is detailed below), the only national association devoted to the study of Abraham Lincoln.

The ALA is grateful to the Lincoln Museum, whose generous allocation of space in *Lincoln Lore* is making this bulletin possible.

HOW TO BECOME A MEMBER OF THE ALA

Annual membership is available at several levels: Individual (\$25); Patron (\$50); Sustaining (\$125); and Benefactor (\$250). Corporate memberships are also invited at \$500 per year. Members receive the prestigious *Journal* of the Abraham Lincoln Association, as well as advance invitations to the annual February 12 Symposium and Banquet in Springfield. To join the ALA, send a letter and check to: Membership, Abraham Lincoln Association, Old State Capitol, Springfield, IL 62701.

1992 SYMPOSIUM AND BANQUET ANNOUNCED

U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Jack Kemp will be the guest speaker at the 1992 Abraham Lincoln Association Banquet, to be held the evening of February 12 at the Ramada Renaissance Hotel.

Secretary Kemp, the one-time quarterback of the AFL Buffalo Bills, later a nine-term member of the House of Representatives from New York State, has served in President Bush's cabinet since 1989. He is the author of two books — *An American Renaissance: Strategy for the 1980s* and *The American Idea: Ending the Limits to Growth*.

Mr. Kemp is also a longtime student of Abraham Lincoln, and delivered a major address on Lincoln at last year's annual observances of the Gettysburg Address.

The banquet is also expected to feature presentation of the ALA's new annual award of achievement, which last year went to the New York State Lincoln on Democracy Project.

Reservations for the 1991 banquet may be made by mail or by phone (217-785-7954). Cost for the dinner is \$35 per person.

Earlier the same day — February 12 — the ALA will host its annual Symposium at 1:30 P.M. inside the historic Hall of Representatives of the Old State Capitol, the chamber where Lincoln delivered his "House Divided" speech in 1858. The theme for this year's Symposium is *The Lincoln Image in Popular Culture*.

Speakers will be Harold Holzer, Director of the New York State Lincoln on Democracy Project, who will present "Columbia's Noblest Sons: Washington and Lincoln in Popular Prints;" and Gabor S. Boritt, Fleuhrer Professor of Civil War Studies and Director of the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College, who will present "The British Printmakers' View of Lincoln."

Holzer and Boritt — together with Mark E. Neely, Jr. — co-authored the pathfinding studies *The Lincoln Image* (1984), *Changing the Lincoln Image* (1985) and *The Confederate Image* (1987). Dr. Boritt is also author of *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* (1978), and Holzer co-edited with Mario M. Cuomo *Lincoln on Democracy* (1990).

Commentators for the Symposium will be Olivia Mahoney, Curator of Decorative and Industrial Arts at the Chicago Historical Society and co-author of *House Divided: America in the Age of Lincoln*, the lavish catalogue of the Society's new Lincoln-era exhibition; and Walter Arnstein, professor of history — and noted authority on Victorian England — at the University of Illinois at Champaign/Urbana.

ALA President Frank J. Williams will introduce the proceedings, and Thomas F. Schwartz, curator of the Henry Horner Lincoln Collection at the Illinois State Historical Library, will serve as moderator of the proceedings, which will be open to the public free of charge. For more information contact Mr. Schwartz (217) 785-7954.



Jack Kemp