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Fateful Lightening, A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction by Allen C. Guelzo

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Guelzo, Allen C. *Fateful Lightening, A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. x + 576 pages. Paper, \$19.95.

Allen Guelzo's *Fateful Lightening* is a wonderful book. It is the summit of a long career of a consummate historian. It is much more in-depth history than such popular histories as James McPherson's 1988 work, *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Yet Guelzo's prose is so effortless that it reads as well as similar popular histories of the era. It is a timely addition to a long tradition of scholarly histories of both the Civil War and Reconstruction. The most recent comprehensive work, that of historian Shelby Foote, is getting a bit dated, so it is time for another addition to this tradition of excellence in scholarly historiography. Guelzo's coverage of the war itself and the various battles and campaigns is more than adequate, but I found other sections of *Fateful Lightening* even more interesting. Guelzo seamlessly weaves the history of actual warfare with other cultural and historical events of the time. He offers, for example, a masterful introduction to the history of the Republic before 1860 and an insightful review of the historical, cultural, and social factors that led inevitably to the war. It was not a forgone conclusion that the two regions would go to war against each other, he argues, but the vast historical, cultural, social, and political differences between the two regions provided almost inevitable clashes about western expansion, slavery, and tariffs. Guelzo also points out that it was not a settled issue that states could not secede from the union as the several real threats of groups of states to secede leading up to actual secession prove.

The discussion of the rational or irrational sources of the war is particularly good. It was, writes Guelzo, a perfectly rational choice to secede and go to war – as against many other historians that claim that the conflict resulted from an irrational set of decisions. Given the historical, cultural, and social differences regionally, as well as the history leading up to secession, secession and war seemed entirely rational and logical decisions. Guelzo's analysis of Abraham Lincoln, spread out throughout the book, is some of his best work in this text. Being the author of a book-length work on Lincoln, Guelzo has an almost intuitive grasp of the quirks of Lincoln's personality as well as his political savvy, and his evolving thinking about race, slavery, and abolition. He comes across as a complex man who retained a driven ambition despite a string of failures, which were later capped by one great success in his election as president. Lincoln's thinking about race, slavery, and abolition evolved over time and Guelzo is most astute in his charting of this evolution. No great friend of slavery, Lincoln, however, was still a man of his time with the concomitant antipathy to "negroes" themselves. He did not start out as the Great Liberator, but, as Guelzo narrates, he rose inevitably to that role.

Guelzo offers two chapters on soldiering in the war and supplying the war, topics that are often omitted from other histories but that are vital for a complete picture of the war. Also present is a masterful discussion of the cultural, gender, and racial revolutions that came about due to the war, at least during the war, and that truly did seem to turn the world upside down. The role of women took some amazing turns during the war, even if they soon returned to more traditional roles following the war. There was an amazing amount of social turmoil during the war that is not always covered in histories of the period. And the obvious changes in the place of African Americans were large, yet mitigated by the demise of Reconstruction.

Fateful Lightening is replete with quotations from the original actors in both eras and I found that this really enhanced Guelzo's telling of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Perhaps I found it so because he incorporates them into his prose effortlessly. Indeed, the book does not read turgidly like some works that are heavy with quotations. Instead, the quotations are riveting

moments in which the original actors come to life in their own words.

If I were to have a quibble, it would be with the use of the word “new” in the book’s subtitle. I went back and read his 1995 work *The Crisis of the American Republic* and found repeated snippets and anecdotes from that work in *Fateful Lightning*. Even if they were worth repeating, it makes it hard to argue that this is history is wholly new.

Fateful Lightning is well worth reading, and would make a good textbook in a class on the eras involved. Because it is so well-written and produces such an engrossing story, it is one that students and scholars alike will relish.

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