


Book Review: The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War by Brian Allen Drake

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Drake, Brian Allen, ed. *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2015. x + 251 pages. Paperback, \$22.95.

This collection of essays penned by environmental historians explores the interaction between humans and nature during the era of the American Civil War. The work emerged from presentations given at a 2011 conference—also entitled “The Blue, the Gray, and the Green”—and it constitutes the fourth in the University of Georgia Press’s UnCivil Wars series. The contributors maintain that ecological connections between flora and fauna, weather, and geography, shape and are shaped by people, and to fail to appreciate the connections, or the “hybridity,” leads us to “miss a good chunk of human experience” (p. 2). The essays seek to show that studying a time period from an environmental history approach often uncovers missed realities concerning nature’s impact on the actions of humans. This relatively new avenue of exploration can lead to a rethinking of long held beliefs and encourage more research in the field. In the book, it is argued that the environmental impact of the Civil War changed not only the South, but the rest of the nation, and ultimately led to the creation of an “environmental management state” (p. 234).

All ten essays stress the hybridity of human and non-human factors in shaping history. To support their claims, the contributors draw upon earlier works in American environmental history, as well as military and political studies; memoirs and diaries; soil surveys; and meteorological, agricultural, and government records. The work admits a need to reach across the aisle to American Civil War military historians, especially if environmental history is going to be taken seriously.

The chapters cover a diverse array of topics from how nature impacted combat and strategic decisions, the home front, and straggling, to national views on conservation, farming practices, and the growth of the United States into an industrial and agricultural giant after the war. The research unearths interesting facts which should make Civil War historians stop and take notice. For instance, Noe’s essay, “Fateful Lightning: The Significance of Weather and Climate to Civil War History,” points out that the Confederacy was fighting for its existence “at one of the worst possible moments in the nineteenth century to launch an agricultural republic in the American Southeast” (p. 21). He argues that the drought over three successive summers, coupled with untimely heavy rains and early winters, had more to do with food shortages in the Confederacy than planter greed and governmental mismanagement, two main reasons historians list as the cause for starvation in the South. Noe further notes that Southern agricultural deficiencies were amplified because the opposite was happening in the North, where the unusual climatic conditions of the early 1860s led to bumper crops in the Midwest.

Meier also investigates the stresses that weather can put on military strength in her essay, “The Man Who Has Nothing to Lose: Environmental Impacts on Civil War Straggling in 1862

Virginia.” Her research finds that one of the most common reasons for straggling was extreme weather coupled with government inability to provide adequate clothing and shelter. Straggling, viewed here as different from desertion, is seen as a deliberate survival technique which allowed men to find their own good water, food and civilian care, away from the unhealthy camps, before rejoining the ranks as effective soldiers.

In “Nature as Friction: Integrating Clausewitz into Environmental Histories of the Civil War.” Brady investigates the ability of nature to cause what the famous military theorist Carl von Clausewitz called ‘friction’ for leaders conducting military campaigns. Von Clausewitz, a Prussian general, maintained that it was rather simple leading an army on paper, but it was the unseen problems that made it very difficult in actual practice. Overcoming this friction was seen by von Clausewitz as the main job of commanders. Brady and other environmental historians believe that nature exhibits an ‘agency’ to affect the leadership skills of officers. For instance, Brady examines what negative effect rain had on Burnside during his infamous Mud March, and the impact acoustic shadows (atmospheric anomalies that stifle or amplify sound) had on leaders at Fort Donelson, Iuka, and Perryville.

The impact that nature had on farming and how it affected the era’s history is also a central theme explored here. Johnson’s “Reconstructing the Soil: Emancipation and Roots of Chemical-Dependent Agriculture in America” argues that slavery before the war was replaced by a new type of bondage after 1865. Johnson maintains that historians have missed the fact that the fertilizer revolution in the South during Reconstruction, although it rehabilitated old fields and increased cotton production, it also—due to the high cost of the man-made chemical nutrients—kept small landowners in perpetual debt leading to decreased profits. The introduction of fertilizers, however, helped southern elites maintain the social order. If small farm operators could not repay their loans, they stood to lose everything to the landlords or the merchants who sold them the fertilizer. Johnson contends that, in the South after the war, there was generally more profit from providing fertilizer than from growing cotton. That being said, applying chemicals to the land created great profits for farmers in other parts of the country, and ultimately made the United States a world agricultural powerhouse.

Paul S. Sutter intimates in his “Epilogue: Waving the Muddy Shirt” that we should take care not to go too far with environmental history, but allow the approach its respective place in the field of historical research. Indeed, the goal of *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War* is to draw attention to the fact that environmental history can enrich our understanding of human history. It can help us see the past, and hopefully the future, in a more discriminating light. The book is a worthwhile read for environmental and Civil War historians.

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