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## Home Front: Daily Life in the Civil War North (Book Review)

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# Book Reviews

**Peter John Brownlee, Sarah Burns, Diane Dillon, Daniel Greene, and Scott Manning Stevens, with foreword by Adam Goodheart.** *Home Front: Daily Life in the Civil War North*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. vii + 193 pp.; 90 color illustrations, figures, exhibition checklist, index. \$35.00.

Given the predominance of photography—especially the battlefield photographs of Matthew Brady and his collaborators—in contemporary understandings of the visual culture of the Civil War, it is easy to forget that photographs occupied a relatively small space within the war’s visual culture for nineteenth-century Americans. As Adam Goodheart writes in his foreword to *Home Front: Daily Life in the Civil War North*, Brady and other wartime photographers played only a “supporting role,” while illustrated newspapers such as *Harper’s Weekly* and *Leslie’s* actually “laid the sights of war on Northern doorsteps and breakfast tables” (xviii).

In this companion volume to a joint exhibition staged by the Terra Foundation for American Art and the Newberry Library, the authors of *Home Front* use the imagery of northern artists and illustrators to engage some of the most fundamental themes of the Civil War in the North: the fate of the national economy, the future of the West, and the sacrifices of women and children. As Sarah Burns and Daniel Greene explain in their introductory essay, the authors in this volume are setting fine art within “a dynamic visual context” that includes newspapers, photographs, advertisements, sheet music, and popular prints (4). Their approach is convincing because it moves beyond

formal art historical discussion of the paintings of, say, Frederic Church or William Sydney Mount, and instead adopts a more inclusive definition of Civil War visual culture.

This collection demonstrates how blind most historical treatments of the Civil War (including, strangely, documentary films) tend to be. Because those on the northern home front could not witness the fighting and its gruesome aftermath for themselves, visual renderings became central to the ways that homebound northerners experienced the war. It was through the work of artists and illustrators that many northerners “read” the war, imagined it, and mourned it.

Imagery that portended a future for the republic (rather than its total destruction) was particularly important to the visualization of the Civil War in the North. Two essays take up this theme, one through images that evoke the economic state of the divided Union and the other through the battle over the West. Both of these essays begin with paintings as their portal but use multiple media from the war years to investigate the theme at hand. Peter John Brownlee, for instance, deconstructs the scene of a busy port in Samuel Colman’s *Ships Unloading, New York* (1868) in order to trace the past and future of the nation’s economy. Colman’s painting of a ship that carried “free labor” cotton before the Civil War both harkens to New York’s and London’s dependence on slave-produced cotton and signals American cotton’s decline in the global market after slavery’s demise. It also conjures the ties between African Americans and the commodity that fueled the nation’s economic and territorial expansion. Yet using maps of the Mississippi and Civil War political cartoons alongside Colman’s painting, Brownlee can also

point to the invisibility of enslaved people in renderings of that economic growth and their inextricability (as enslaved people and as wartime contraband) from the networks of trade that bound the North and South to the global market.

Similarly, Scott Stevens introduces Native Americans into the narrative of the Civil War, studying Eugene Benson's *Indian Attack* (1858) alongside photographs and cartoons for evidence of natives' roles in the war. Engravings of white women under siege on the frontier or the execution of thirty-eight Sioux people printed in *Harper's Weekly*, considered beside recruitment broadsides for "Indian fighters"—all of these published during the Civil War—reintroduce Native Americans into the visual experience of the Civil War. Although many whites "consigned [Native Americans] to the past or to its frontier," the war "brought new threats and devastating military interventions" like the one at Sand Creek in 1864 (48). Already in the 1850s, artists used the figures of Native Americans, such as Ferdinand Pettrich's *The Dying Tecumseh* (1856), to place the bodies of dying Indians at the feet of American progress. Benson's painting, in retrospect, portended even worse consequences for indigenous people after 1865.

The sacrifices of white civilians also held a prominent place in the visual culture of the era. Essays by Daniel Greene and Sarah Burns examine this theme from the perspective of public service and domestic labor, much of it done by women. Greene looks at the sanitary fairs in Chicago, which both boosted patriotic feeling and raised money for the Union. The efforts of the United States Sanitary Commission (staffed by mostly female volunteers) "depended on understanding how deeply intertwined home and front were" during the war "and on recognizing the permeability of the boundaries between the two realms" (97). Thomas Nast's mass-produced engraving of women tending the bedsides of soldiers and sewing flags printed in *Harper's Weekly* in 1864, for instance, both softened the agonies of war and proved the efficiency with which the Union managed the needs of soldiers. Sarah Burns's masterful discussion of Lilly Martin Spencer's *The Home of the Red White and Blue* (1867–68) brings a female artist's perspective to the fore. Burns uses the painting, alongside ornate certificates from the Ladies' Loyal Union League and popular engravings by Winslow Homer from *Harper's Weekly*, to review the myriad sacrifices northern women made to keep their households afloat while their men were away, and the support required of them, still, when their men came home again, less able bodied than when they left.

Perhaps the most surprising and innovative essay in the collection is the last to appear. In William Sydney Mount's *Fruit Piece: Apples on Tin Cups* (1864), Diane Dillon finds battlefield scarcities, the restorative work of sanitary fairs, photography's influence, and the ache of the missing soldier-father-husband-son. Dillon manages to use this painting to both explain the calculating strategies of successful nature artists during the war and to expose the emotional benefits of their work for viewers. Because these illustrations were not obviously about the war, they would have more staying power as works of art afterward. The imperfect apples and the tin cups on which they sit, however, arguably had more evocative power than the most detailed illustration of a dying soldier. The absence of the soldier who might have cradled the cup in his hands, in Mount's painting, makes the viewer ache for his return.

A long-term quibble here is one that I have with most discussions of the visual culture of the Civil War: the notion that such a culture was largely limited to the North. True, after the start of the war, southerners had limited access to printing presses and even before the war did not have a magazine industry comparable to New York. Yet they managed to print Confederate stationery and envelopes and broadsides (some of which advertised enslaved people even during the war). In some southern cities, in fact, publishers were printing sheet music of "Dixie" and the "Bonnie Blue Flag," sometimes on recycled wallpaper.

If we aim to take visualization seriously as a window into the past, then we should consider how people witnessed the world around them, not just how they read the work artists and editors produced. This could include the abundant material culture of the Civil War South. And it could draw upon visual experiences like those that Yael Sternhell describes in her work on the emotional and political effects of watching Civil War mobilizations within the Confederacy.<sup>1</sup> While such an analysis is beyond the scope of this current volume and exhibition, the keen interpretations in *Home Front* make the case for the illuminating power of visual studies of the Civil War that draw upon the rich imagery of everyday life.

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<sup>1</sup> Yael A. Sternhell, *Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).