

Astride Two Worlds: Technology And The American Civil War

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Review

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Hacker, Barton C. *Astride Two Worlds: Technology and the American Civil War*. Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, \$37.95 ISBN 9781935623915

Exceptional or Representative: Technology and the American Civil War

When lecturing about the American Civil War, one finds that the question of whether it was the ‘first modern war’ or the ‘last Napoleonic conflict’ invariably intrigues students—who then devote perhaps too much of their research essays upon the comparatively straightforward, technological factors rather than the messier, seemingly less tangible political ones. (Then again, analyses of raw ‘weapons and tactics’ continue to dominate military history no matter how much academics might complain.) But those students who come across this book will fortunately be led into a much more sophisticated rendering of the topic, from nine authors including the editor, Dr. Barton C. Hacker, senior curator of armed forces history at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History.

Stemming from a 2012 conference, the following chapter-essays range from Merritt Roe Smith’s take on mass-production of small arms to Steven A. Walton’s survey of the big guns, from field artillery to seacoast ‘monsters’, which also seems to have made the most of international sources and reports, for example. Other interesting chapters include David J. Gerleman’s “Veterinary Care in the Union Cavalry”, John A. Macaulay’s discussion of observation balloons, and a recounting of the use of the telegraph technology as a system of modern ‘information flow’ by Seymour E. Goodman. The two chapters which really stand out as relative novelties are undoubtedly Sarah Jones Weicksel’s look at the potential use of body armor (and its rejection on a point of ‘manhood’ and ‘the politics of mortality’) and Tom D. Crouch’s research on Civil War ‘dreams’ to design and deploy actual heavier-than-air flying machines such as proto-helicopters for recon and attack. This is fantastic.

And yet *Astride Two Worlds* occasionally misses out on some wider contexts which are useful when attempting to define the role of technology in the American Civil War. As the editor notes in his own essay, this “was both the last great preindustrial war and the first major war of the industrial age”, which to a critical reader seems an equivocation evading a tough question. What about the Crimean War (1853-1856) between Russia, Great Britain, France and Turkey, ending just five years before the Civil War began? After all, the most important pre-war analysis of ‘The Art of War’ was published in America just as the Secession Crisis of 1860 forced professional military and naval officers to take sides, North or South. This was a huge, in-depth study of not just Crimean War campaigns such as the Siege of Sevastopol (which American officers like George B. McClellan famously observed as part of the formal U.S. military commission there) but a fully-illustrated, meticulously-detailed report on the latest European military and naval technologies and practices in general.

Some of this might be down to careful word-play. So what’s the difference, for example, between ‘great’ and ‘major’? If the American Civil War was larger and more intensive than the Crimean War (something few historians would argue against) what exactly made it so? Perhaps it wasn’t so much about technological means as political ends which determined *how many would die before there was peace*, and if so, did the latter dictate the former’s impact as major or not? Hence, the Crimean War—which featured rifled muskets, telegraph communications, steam-powered logistics by ship and rail, exploding shell-fire and trenchworks, as well as ironclad warships—is mentioned only in passing; by Goodman’s essay (Chapter 4), and in the excellent sixth chapter on “Confederate Spar-Torpedo Boats” by Jorit Wintjes. ‘Sevastopol’ isn’t noted in the index at all, neither is Major Richard Delafield, Corps of Engineers, a former superintendent of West Point in charge of New York City’s harbor defences and author of the Crimean War commission’s official report, *The Art of the War in Europe* (1860), before becoming Chief Engineer in 1864.

Likewise, the editor notes in his introductory chapter that the Union turreted ironclad USS *Monitor* was the sole “wartime invention...[which] significantly affected the course of the war”, and that this was “the first time in history” that a “a new weapon was designed, developed, and deployed during the same war.” But it’s fairly well known that John Ericsson, the *Monitor*’s inventor, first pitched the concept of a ‘sub-aquatic system’ of naval warfare (solely steam-powered, screw-propelled, fully armored and with a revolving turret) to French Emperor Napoleon III during the Crimean War. Its purpose was to

penetrate the gauntlet of granite forts guarding the main Russian naval base at Cronstadt (St. Petersburg), sink all of the wooden men-of-war sheltering there, and then steam back out safely enough. Following the rejection of his proposal by France, Ericsson's model collected dust in his home until 1861, when U.S. agents took a sudden, dramatic interest in the concept. It was therefore no coincidence that when naming his extraordinary vessel in January 1862 Ericsson stated it would "admonish the leaders of the Southern Rebellion that the batteries on the banks of their rivers will no longer present barriers to the entrance of the Union forces." But then he also added that British leaders both in the Admiralty and 'Downing Street' "would hardly view with indifference this last 'Yankee notion,' this monitor." The American Civil War wasn't just 'astride two worlds' temporally, but spatially astride the 'Old' and 'New' worlds, inasmuch as events on one side of the Atlantic increasingly affected strategic interests on the other.

In closing, this work is presented very well, wisely interspacing photos and illustrations in the various chapters rather than a middle insert section. Endnotes, on the other hand, would have been preferable than in-text parentheses. For one, they allow for fuller reference-citations which include page numbers not just author names, publication year and perhaps chapters. An edited collection of essays especially ought to map out precisely where to go for further reading and tracing contributors' research as precisely as possible.

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