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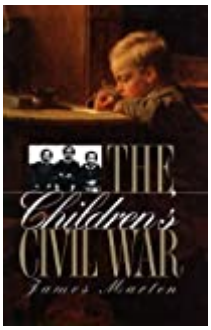
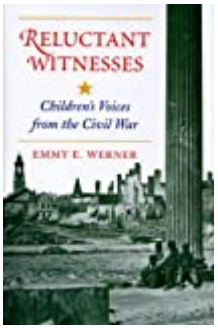
Emmy E. Werner. *Reluctant Witnesses: Children's Voices from the Civil War Era.* Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1998. xi + 175 pp.



James Marten. *The Children's Civil War.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xi + 365 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2425-2.



Emily E. Werner. *Reluctant Witnesses: Children's Voices from the Civil War.* New York: Westview Press, 1998. xi + 175. $24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-2822-5.

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Children and the American Civil War

In many parts of the world, youngsters encounter the horrors of war on an appallingly regular basis. Although exposed to myriad other forms of violence, children in the United States have been remarkably insulated from direct encounters with military combat. One of the main exceptions has been those children who grew up during the Civil War era.[1] James Marten and Emmy Werner have produced the first two major studies of how young Americans fared in their fiery passage through these years. Each of these books has its own strengths, but Marten's work is more deeply researched and his crisp narrative is more engaging. *The Children's Civil War*, in short, establishes him as the preeminent historian in this newly emerging field of U.S. history.[2]

Until recently, as Hugh Cunningham observes in a

sweeping review essay on the history of childhood published this past fall, those reconstructing children's pasts have closely followed the agenda first established by Philippe Aries in his classic book published nearly forty years ago, *Centuries of Childhood*. This approach has emphasized ideas about childhood and the adult treatment of children. If the children themselves appear on the historical stage, it is usually as passive and marginal characters, objects rather than agents of history.[3]

James Marten, following the lead of Elliot West's work on children in the American West, escapes the long shadow cast by Aries.[4] Certainly, Marten pays close attention to the ways in which cultural attitudes towards children changed in response to the outbreak of the Civil War and how military conflict affected the interactions of parents with their offspring. He traces, for example, how the war led to a shift in emphasis from religious to patriotic concerns in magazines and other writings for children. Toys and a variety of public performances, like children's literature, also reflected a growing awareness of young Americans as consumers. Marten's examination of correspondence between fathers who went off to war and their children discloses the continued involvement of these parents in the lives of those left behind. Indeed, Marten argues that the physical separation actually increased the commitment of fathers to affective relationships with their children.

But the central thrust of *The Children's Civil War* is its insistence on seeing American youngsters, northern and southern, black and white, "not merely as appendages to their parents' experiences but as actors in their own right in the great national drama" (p. 5). Drawing on extensive research in manuscript collections throughout the North and South as well as published memoirs, diaries, autobiographies, and correspondence, Marten explores how the outbreak of war changed children's lives and how they participated in the struggle. Youngsters in both sections exhibited a keen appetite for martial affairs during the early years of the war, although the children of the Confederacy had a greater opportunity to "see the elephant" up close. As Marten points out, northern children were not immune to the violence; many young northerners lived through the draft riots that broke out in several cities during the summer of 1863, and in New York City gangs of boys joined the rioters. Furthermore, Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania that same summer brought the war to the porch steps of many northern households. Southern children, however, bore the brunt of the conflict. It came crashing into their lives, cutting short their childhoods, imposing severe restrictions on the most basic resources, and wounding and killing many of them.

These formative experiences, according to Marten, politicized children and generated a wide range of responses to the Civil War. Marten does a marvelous job of introducing us to the diverse ways in which the war intersected the lives of boys and girls, but perhaps his most important contribution is his provocative analysis of how they "became a part of the struggle, not just as victims or spectators but as politicians and home-front warriors" (p. 149). Marten shows, for example, how schools became contested terrain on which students, administrators, and parents battled over such issues as course content, school activities, and songs. Following the occupation of New Orleans by Federal troops, the city's classrooms became a key arena in the clash between the Unionist government and Confederate supporters. Children wore mourning ribbons and refused to participate in Union ceremonies while parents and teachers resisted the efforts of Gens. Benjamin Butler and Nathaniel Banks to exert control over the schools.

Marten recognizes the many ways that parents shaped the political views of their children, but he also makes clear that boys and girls manifested a significant degree of independent political behavior. In other words, like Robert Coles, Marten takes children seriously as political and moral actors.[5] Young Yankees, for instance, published their own newspapers, calling on their peers to support the Union or else face the consequences. "Don't give up the ship, boys!" exclaimed one editorial in the Concord, Massachusetts *Observer* in the fall of 1862. "Stand by her to the last hour ... War must become the daily vocations of us all" (p. 157).

The politically charged nature of children's play also attracts Marten's attention. Youngsters throughout the North and South formed mock militia units, carried out drills, and mimicked soldiers in other ways, incorporating the intensifying militarism of their society into their everyday lives. Most of Marten's analysis of play focuses on boys, however, and one is left with a rather sketchy picture of how the "war fever" affected the games that girls played. Still, when he turns to the question of how children contributed to the war efforts of their sections, Marten gives girls a much more visible role. He discusses, among other things, their participation in the numerous Sanitary Fairs that sprang up in northern cities and towns to raise money and collect supplies for the Union troops as well as their efforts in the South to sew and knit clothing for Confederate soldiers.

As the children of the Civil War grew up, how did

they apply the political lessons learned during wartime to their adult lives? To his credit, Marten avoids any easy answers to this complex question. Northern children presented the least coherent pattern of how they constructed political meaning out of their wartime education; the clearest line of influence can be found among Civil War children of abolitionists who continued to work for racial justice. Marten's generalizations about southern whites and blacks are more suggestive. White southerners tended to mourn their lost childhoods more than northerners. Having endured wartime hardships and a pervasive sense of powerlessness in the face of a victorious enemy, they turned to the nostalgia of the Lost Cause and the bitter satisfactions of race baiting as they came of age. Freed girls and boys experienced a sense of community that extended beyond their home plantations and farms following emancipation, a resource that proved invaluable as they took up the reins of leadership later in their lives. In all these ways, and more, the Civil War left its imprint on those who grew up during this era.

Marten explicitly excludes from his study underage soldiers and drummer boys, a puzzling decision given his interest in how the war politicized children. Contending that military service made these members of the Confederate and Union armies "de facto adults," he insists that "their experiences resembled the exploits of the men with whom they served more than those of the children who stayed home" (p. 2). I would argue, however, that these children occupied a middle ground between the adult soldiers and youngsters on the home front, and for this reason they have the potential to illuminate how the war shaped the coming of age process in these years. In short, leaving this group out of *The Children's Civil War* represents a missed opportunity to understand more about how the concept of adolescence emerged in the late nineteenth century. Deciding to exclude them also leaves us with little sense of how the experience of young soldiers may have affected their political outlook and behavior as adults.

Emmy Werner, in contrast to Marten, includes the voices of teenagers who fought in the Civil War as well as to those who lived on the home front. She asserts that between 10 and 20 percent of all new recruits who enlisted in the Confederate and Union armies were underage, although she provides no documentation for this claim. Marten's examination of the literature suggests that closer to 5 percent is a more accurate estimate.[6] Nonetheless, *Reluctant Witnesses* reveals that those boys who did join the military rarely received any special treatment; like adult soldiers, they struggled with anxiety about combat, illness, shortages of food and supplies, the boring routine of camp life, and homesickness.

The crucial difference, of course, is that these boys were compelled to act like adults almost overnight, an experience shared by children on the home front, although in a less intense fashion. It would not be surprising if a generation of men and women who underwent this sort of terrifically compressed coming of age, whether in combat or on the home front, had a great desire to protect their own children from a similarly hurried growing up when they became parents, a possibility that might help explain the invention of adolescence at the end of the nineteenth century.

In any event, these sorts of broader speculations about the implications of her findings are almost completely absent from Werner's *Reluctant Witnesses*. Instead, the book consists largely of lengthy quotations loosely stitched together by a passing comment or two from the author, with only a handful of citations to guide the reader. The lack of analysis and references is particularly disconcerting because Werner is a developmental psychologist who has written extensively about children, and presumably has gained insights from this work that could further our understanding of how northern and southern youngsters coped with the stresses and strains generated by the Civil War. In the prologue, Werner announces that she intends to explore the children's "astonishing resilience in the face of great adversity and their extraordinary capacity to pick up and mend the pieces of their shattered lives" (p. 5). Werner picks up on the themes of resiliency and resourcefulness in the epilogue, placing the experience of Civil War children in the context of those who have endured the wars of the twentieth century. But the core of the book does little to develop the analytical framework hinted at elsewhere.

Although ostensibly a social history, Werner organizes the majority of her chapters around the major battles and campaigns. The traditional approach of *Reluctant Witnesses* to the Civil War can also be discerned in the brief chronology that she provides at the end of the book, where all the noted dates involve military events. One wonders why, in a book about the experience of children, there is no mention in the chronology of the Richmond bread riots, in which youngsters as well as women participated. The reader is left with the very definite impression–not necessarily one that Werner meant to convey–that reconstructing the experiences of children does not significantly alter the conventional story of the Civil War.

Unlike Marten, who has mined dozens of archives across the country looking for new material to enrich his study, Werner has put little effort into this sort of original research, relying largely on published memoirs, diaries, and letters. Confining herself to these relatively familiar sources of evidence, she still manages to tell a number of moving stories that offer fascinating glimpses of how children participated in the Civil War and how it transformed their lives. The accounts of the young Union prisoners at Andersonville are especially harrowing; Billy Bates, who was fifteen years old when he arrived at the Confederate prison camp, was caught trying to tunnel out. The head of Andersonville, Captain Henri Wirz, had the boy suspended by his thumbs and shot him twice in his left leg and thigh. Somehow Bates survived this ordeal and managed to escape Andersonville eight months later with another boy, Dick King. When the two met with President Lincoln at the White House about five weeks after they reached the Union lines, Bates weighed sixty pounds and King sixty-four pounds. Upon hearing their stories, Lincoln reportedly jumped to his feet and exclaimed, "My God, when will this accursed thing end?" (p. 95).

Few readers will have this reaction to the stories shared by Marten and Werner. Their work has established an exciting new way to look at the most exhaustively treated subject in American history. Undergraduate students will respond with particular enthusiasm to *The Children's Civil War* because of the lucid writing and thoughtful, unpretentious analysis; those who teach courses on the Civil War, the history of childhood, and nineteenth-century social history will surely want to consider adopting Marten's book once it is issued in paperback.

As scholars explore in more detail this overlooked aspect of our past, one of the main tasks will be to investigate more carefully how age differences among children shaped their encounter with the war. Both Marten and Werner tend to lump together all children under sixteen or so without distinguishing much between younger and older children. Also, historians need to look more closely at how race and gender shaped the world of children during these years. Although *The Children's Civil War* and *Reluctant Witnesses* examine the lives of blacks and whites as well as girls and boys, there is little systematic effort in either work to sort out the impact of race and gender. Understandably enough, the focus of both studies is on sectional distinctions; sometimes, however, this concern overshadows other factors that generated important variations in experiences among these wartime children.

Finally, we need to extend the history of southern children into the Reconstruction era. Although Confederate forces laid down their arms in 1865, the struggle over the future of the South continued and, in many ways, even intensified in the political, cultural, and economic spheres. How young southerners participated in this contest is another chapter in an ongoing story, rather than another story separate and apart from that of the Civil War.

Catherine Clinton urged historians in the 1996 Averitt Lectures at Georgia Southern University to "set ourselves a new course in Civil War studies ... and try to imagine a whole sea of children, lining the docks, waving us back–beckoning us to tell stories, *their* stories of war."[7] Together Marten and Werner have ably mapped out the direction of future studies of Civil War children, and their pioneering books will undoubtedly fuel the exploding interest in the social history of the nation's greatest tragedy. As historian Gary Gallagher is fond of remarking, "The Civil War is a big tent." The work of Marten and Werner, it seems safe to say, has made it an even bigger tent.

Notes

[1]. The other significant exception that comes immediately to mind is the experience of young Native Americans during the wars to remove tribes west of the Mississippi River and then during the military campaigns launched by the federal government to drive them onto reservations. I am unaware, however, of any studies that focus on this subject. For assessments of contemporary warfare and children, see Secretary General, United Nations, *Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children: Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* (New York: United Nations General Assembly, 1996), and Human Rights Watch Children's Rights Project, *Children in Combat* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1996). Other valuable works on youngsters during wartime include Roger Rosenblatt, *Children of War* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1983); George Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games Among the Shadows* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Kati David, *A Child's War: World War II Through the Eyes of Children* (New York: Avon Books, 1989); and William M. Tuttle, Jr., *"Daddy's Gone to War": The Second World War in the Lives of America's Children* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). The latter investigation, though, differs in that U.S. children did not experience military conflict firsthand during World War II.

[2]. Marten has also just published a vivid collection of material from children's magazines published during the Civil War, *Lessons of War: The Civil War in Children's Magazines* (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 1999). He worked out his ideas for *The Children's Civil War* in a series of shorter pieces: "For the Good, the True, and the Beautiful: Northern Children's Magazines and the Civil War," *Civil War History*, 41 (March 1995): 57-75; "Stern Realities: Children of Chancellorsville and Beyond," in Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *Chancellorsville: The Battle and Its Aftermath* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 219-43; and "Fatherhood in the Confederacy: Southern Soldiers and Their Children," *Journal of Southern History*, 63 (May 1997): 269-92. Other important studies of children's lives during the Civil War era include Rebecca J. Scott, "The Battle over the Child: Child Apprenticeship and the Freedmen's Bureau in North Carolina," in *Growing Up in America: Children in Historical Perspective*, eds. N. Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 193-207; Elizabeth Daniels, "The Children of Gettysburg," *American Heritage* 40 (May-June 1989): 97-107; Peter W. Bardaglio, "The Children of Jubilee: African-American Childhood in Wartime," in Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War, eds. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 213-29; and Catherine Clinton, "Orphans of the Storm," in her *Civil War Stories* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1998), pp. 42-80.

[3]. Hugh Cunningham, "Histories of Childhood," *American Historical Review*, 103 (October 1998): 1195-1208; and Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965). The original French language version of Aries's book was published in 1960.

[4]. Elliot West, *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989). An excellent collection of essays that depict American children as historical actors can be found in Elliott West and Paula Petrik, *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in American, 1850-1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992).

[5]. See, for example, Robert Coles, *The Political Life of Children* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).

[6]. Werner's estimate of ten to twenty percent seems to be drawn from Jim Murphy, *The Boy's War: Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk about the Civil War* (New York: Clarion Books, 1990), p. 2. It is difficult to tell for certain because Werner does not provide a footnote, but Murphy's book is listed in the bibliography. *The Boy's War*, aimed at young adult readers, also does not offer any citations, so the ultimate source of this estimate remains a mystery.

[7]. Clinton, *Civil War Stories*, p. 80.

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