The War Between The States: America's Uncivil War
(By John J. Dwyer, et al., Bluebonnet Press)

Reviewed by Roger D. McGrath

The War Between The States by John J. Dwyer, et al., is the best textbook for the high school, preparatory academy, or junior college I've ever read. Moreover, it covers far more than its title suggests. Not only is the war thoroughly discussed but also the war's background and its aftermath. By background I don't mean simply another review of abolitionists and firebrands in the antebellum period but a discussion of the formation of the Union itself and the elements and factions in that coalition of former British colonies that would eventually lead to fracture. Slavery was but one element. Similarly, Dwyer moves the reader well beyond the obvious conclusion of the war—the South was defeated and slavery abolished—but into other consequences for the nation: a federal leviathan was created ushering in an age not only of unparalleled usurpation of individual and states rights and a general disregard for the Constitution but also public corruption to a degree impossible in the days when government was limited to essential powers.

Perhaps the most difficult book to write is a textbook. If the book is comprehensive enough to adequately cover its topic, it will either be a tome the size and weight of an encyclopedia or be such a superficial summary that it contains nothing to pique the interest of the student. Furthermore, one of the most difficult tasks any historian faces is a concise and accurate summation of complex events and personalities. Distortion and misrepresentation almost invariably creep in, even though the author has the very best of intentions. When it comes to as controversial and divisive a topic as the American Civil War—and I've used the alternate term for the war intentionally—all such problems with a textbook are exacerbated.

To have largely overcome these problems, as has Dwyer, is a stunning success. Being more of the Yankee persuasion—three of my relatives fought for the Union and one died at Gettysburg—I had anticipated that Dwyer's choice for the book's title meant that I would be reading an apologia for the South. Such is not the case. Dwyer may have his bias but he is eminently and scrupulously fair. This is not the case with most textbook discussions of the war, its prelude, and aftermath. I had been reared on textbooks that clearly painted Southerners as the bad guys. It wasn't until I was studying for my doctorate that I learned that the South was not entirely to blame or entirely wrong for the whole tragic conflict.

Ironically, one of the professors on my doctoral committee specialized in Civil War and Reconstruction and had a very anti-Southern perspective. The professor had, among other works, written an admiring biography of probably the most vengeful and vindictive of the Radical Republicans who was "the scourge of the South" during Reconstruction. As a result, I read dozens of books on the era and personally discussed every one of them with the professor. Such intensive reading and discussion led me to read many books from the Southern perspective. I was surprised by how much reason, logic, tradition, and

Constitutional history was on the Southerners' side. I was also stunned by what I hadn't been told—the far more sinister and insidious *sin of omission*. I had long been battling teachers about what they had left out of their lectures or readings on other subjects—dating back to junior high school—but not on the Civil War. All this is to say that Dwyer does an outstanding job of clearly and fairly identifying the relevant issues and conducting honest discussion. The only element lacking is a bibliographical essay at the end of each chapter that I think most teachers and students would find highly useful. The lack is my lone criticism of the volume and surprises me because Dwyer is obviously intimately familiar with the scholarly literature representing all perspectives—not only is the text replete with information gleaned from such sources but Dwyer often mentions a source used or makes an unambiguous allusion to the same.

Chapter by chapter Dwyer takes the reader on the long journey through the whole, epic tragedy. It is evident from the outset that this will take some time, like Thucydides guiding us through the Peloponnesian War. But Dwyer writes clearly, concisely, and with insight and passion. Unlike so many authors in academe today, Dwyer loves his country and her people. Nor does he deny the culture and religion that enabled the American people to prosper and build a great and powerful, though humanly flawed, nation. Perhaps, I spent too many years teaching at the university and my view of many of my colleagues became jaundiced but the professors who screamed loudest about compassion certainly didn't seem to have any for our own American ancestors. Dwyer does. A reader will feel it immediately. The death, destruction, disease, and maiming of the war, and the changes it wrought in America, are tragic and painful for him.

It always struck me as strange how so many professors I knew had a professed love for some Third World peoples somewhere but no palpable feelings for the boys of the Fighting 69th --who were given last rites by their regimental chaplain *before* they left the line of departure and then were mowed down crossing hundreds of yards of open fields at Fredericksburg—or for Confederate teenagers in bare feet and homespun with acorns for food trying to hold Chickamauga Ridge against a massive Union assault. My God! These were our people, our blood, our faith. It tears my heart in two.

What also makes Dwyer's contribution to the world of textbooks significant is his inclusion of not only the essential chronology and data, and the characters and events that made the history he discusses, but enough information about the latter to engage and intrigue the reader. Nearly every chapter has sidebars focusing on particularly important or poignant figures or events or quoted matter from primary documents. It may be a cliché to say he makes history come alive but that is exactly what he does. I might add that history should come alive. What could be more fascinating than learning about ourselves, our people, our culture, our faith—what made us as a people.

Many of the discussion topics in *The War Between The States* remind me of my own regular column, "Sins of Omission," which I started writing after years of teaching at UCLA and realizing that year by year students knew less and less American history. It should come as no surprise that SAT scores peaked in 1963 and are dramatically lower today, especially in history and literature. A test given to a sampling of graduating

college seniors in 2003 revealed that they knew more math and science—but not by much--and considerably less history than graduating *high school* seniors in 1953.

The full story of slavery, for example, is unknown to nearly all students today. When I discussed the topic in my classes, I always put it in context and treated no elements of it as taboo. Because of presentations of the topic becoming ever more censored in the 1970s and 80s, I had students sitting in stunned disbelief as I described black slave masters in the American South. It was the first time they had heard such a thing! Perhaps, 20,000 or more black slaves were owned by black masters. The black slave owners bought and sold their chattel property, worked and leased them, treated them well and abused them, emancipated and fought tooth and nail to keep them enslaved—just like their white counterparts. But all of this is not to be discussed today, nor is the fact that armies of whites did not invade West Africa and capture innocent children of nature collecting a bounty of native fruits hanging from trees. White traders bartered rum and other goods to African tribal leaders for already enslaved Africans. Dwyer does not shy away from telling such truths about slavery for fear of the speech police censoring his work and neither does he shy away from describing the horrors of the Middle Passage or the depths of depravity that could result from the practice of slavery.

The good, the bad, and the ugly is all here. So too is the courageous, heroic, and God-fearing. No one fits the latter category better than Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson, who arrived at West Point as a country bumpkin much scorned by his more sophisticated classmates. After almost flunking out of the Academy, his natural tenacity and Christian faith steadied him and he excelled. He achieved fame in the Mexican War by helping to lead the charge up Chapultepec Hill and capture the Halls of Montezuma. He taught for a decade thereafter at VMI. He suffered several personal tragedies that would have left most people bereft and in despair. Nonetheless, he persevered and prospered. His life, long before his Confederate heroics in the Civil War, should serve as an inspiration to all maturing American youngsters today—if only they knew of it.

Jackson is but one of many inspirational figures who Dwyer devotes especial attention to throughout the book. Another is Philip Sheridan, perhaps Jackson's northern counterpart. The son of Irish immigrants, he was reared in Ohio and arrived at West Point without the education or trappings of most of the other officer candidates. He was suspended, and nearly expelled, from West Point for a fight with an upperclassman. He was an indifferent soldier during peacetime but once the fight was on there was no better or more courageous leader. He distinguished himself in battle after battle and by 1863, only 32-years-old, he was a major general. The next year he became commander of the Army of the Shenandoah, setting the stage for "Sheridan's Ride." He single-handedly changed the Union concept of how cavalry should be used both tactically and strategically. The son of immigrants ended his career as General-in-Chief of the United States Army. Ask an American student today if they know of Philip Sheridan.

Dwyer does not neglect women, either. There are Southern heroines such as spy and scout Belle Boyd, whose exploits, even when the embellishments have been striped away, are mind-boggling. Twice she was imprisoned by the Yankees and finally she was

exiled to England. Most of her derring-do was accomplished while she was still a teenager. Margaret Junkin Preston suffered terrible personal losses to become renowned as the "Poetess of the Confederacy." Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, New England Yankee that he was, considered her one of America's finest poets. If Robert E. Lee set the standard for Confederate gentlemen, then Mary Custis Lee did the same for the ladies of the South. Bearing physical pain that would render most people bedridden, she shouldered much of the responsibility for keeping the family intact and managing the family plantation while her husband was fighting Indian Wars, the Mexican War, or the Civil War. Northerners such as Dorothea Dix, the crusader for the reform of mental institutions and later superintendent of female nurses for the Union during the war, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, whom President Lincoln called "the woman that wrote the book that caused this war," and Harriet Tubman, a runaway slave who helped operate the "underground railroad" and many others enjoy excellent sidebar treatment too.

Throughout his discussions of all these complex and controversial figures and events, Dwyer manages to distill the essence of the person or action in the most readable and concise manner imaginable. His discussion of Roger Taney, perhaps America's most wickedly misrepresented jurist, is one of the best I've ever seen. Dwyer's work is full of many similar gems. Moreover, the book is handsomely bound and well illustrated. If anyone is interested in a comprehensive and engaging, scrupulously fair and honest, one-volume text covering the American Civil War, its causes, conduct, and ramifications—and personalities, *The War Between The States: America's Uncivil War* is the one.

Roger D. McGrath, Ph.D.: with years of military experience first as a former Marine and later as a military historian with the California Center for Military History. Prof. McGrath taught history at UCLA for 15 years, before teaching at Pepperdine, and ultimately California State University-Northridge. He is the author of *Gunfighters, Highwaymen, and Vigilantes* (University of California Press 1984) and contributor to *Crime in the West: Then and Now, Violence and Lawlessness on the Western Frontier,* and *Violence in America: The History of Crime* as well as several articles: *Death Before Dishonor,* Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture, *Treat Them to a Good Dose of Lead,* Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture, *The Myth of Violent Frontier,* Harper's Magazine. He has published more than 30 articles, encyclopedia entries, and book reviews on other topics as well. Dr. McGrath has appeared as an expert on the Old West, World War II, and the history of crime in the A & E and History Channel documentaries *The Real West* (25 episodes), Biography (6 episodes), *Tales of the Gun* (3 episodes), *Save our History - Valley Forge;* and a dozen more documentaries on the Discovery Channel, TNT, and other networks, including *Forgotten Wars, Crimes in Time, Outlaws, Outlaws and Lawmen,* and *The Story of the Gun.* Roger's other television and radio experience includes CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, and others. Among his other academic specialties are subjects on the American West, the Irish in America, and World War II. Some of his more recent works include *Death Before Dishonor, Letter From California: The Reconquista of California,* and *The Western Way of War: From Plato to NATO.*