



What Caused the Civil War?: Reflections on the South and Southern History

By Edward L. Ayers

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“An extremely good writer, [Ayers] is well worth reading . . . on the South and Southern history.” Stephen Sears, *Boston Globe*

The Southern past has proven to be fertile ground for great works of history. Peculiarities of tragic proportions—a system of slavery flourishing in a land of freedom, secession and Civil War tearing at a federal Union, deep poverty persisting in a nation of fast-paced development—have fed the imaginations of some of our most accomplished historians.

Foremost in their ranks today is Edward L. Ayers, author of the award-winning and ongoing study of the Civil War in the heart of America, the Valley of the Shadow Project. In wide-ranging essays on the Civil War, the New South, and the twentieth-century South, Ayers turns over the rich soil of Southern life to explore the sources of the nation's and his own history. The title essay, original here, distills his vast research and offers a fresh perspective on the nation's central historical event.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Bancroft Prize winner Ayers (*In the Presence of Mine Enemies*) offers a unique collection of deeply compelling and at times deeply personal essays in which he ponders the South, Southern identity and culture. In fact, only one of these essays deals head-on with the book's title question. In this paper, Ayers makes clear that no one neat answer—economics, the peculiar institution of slavery, or states rights—will do. A subtle combination of all these factors plus regional pride, agrarian idealism and a strong dose of Jeffersonian suspicion of federalism created the schism that led to the Civil War. Other essays take on such topics as Southern wannabes in Northern industrial centers, Reconstruction, a modern definition of the South and the "New South." Several key points run through these essays. Intent on creating a historiography with contemporary value, Ayers insists (with some reason) that the culture—both white and black—of the South has telegraphed itself in vital ways across the national landscape, pervading our roadsides, television screens, radio airwaves and computers. Southern rock is a dominant force: Elvis rules. So do Nascar, John Grisham and Civil War reenactment games for Macintosh and PC computers. Ayers, the spiritual and intellectual heir of C. Vann Woodward, takes in all of this engagingly and eloquently. (June 20)

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Review

Essays by a Southern historian reflecting on what makes his region distinctive. Ayers (History/Univ. of Virginia; *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, 2003) begins with an autobiographical essay about growing up in the South and coming to understand its effect on his life. In fact, it wasn't until grad school-at Yale-that the author began to recognize himself as somehow different from his fellow students. A second essay attempts to clarify the region's distinctive character, at the same time emphasizing a theme that recurs throughout: the great complexity of the South and of its history. Even slavery, usually cited as the defining issue of the region, was far more complex than many historians recognize. Enthusiasm for secession didn't correlate with local patterns of slave-owning, nor did ending slavery emerge as the main justification for the Civil War until late in the conflict. Civil War historians have argued back and forth about the causes of the conflict. The dominant school long argued that economic issues such as tariffs and industrialism were more critical in causing the war than the slavery issue-and that the conflict might well have been avoided. More recently, the focus on slavery in such works as Ken Burns's Civil War documentary and James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* has presented the image of a tragic and inevitable-but finally cleansing-conflict. The truth, Ayers argues, embodies some of both viewpoints and resists "bumper-sticker" answers. An essay on Reconstruction compares the Southern experience to America's attempts over the last century to rebuild other conquered nations and suggests that important lessons for the Iraq invasion and similar future ventures might arise from it. A final essay pays homage to C. Vann Woodward, the great chronicler of the New South. Thoughtful, balanced, well-written American history. (Kirkus Reviews)

About the Author

Edward L. Ayers is a leading historian of the Civil War and the author of *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, winner of the Bancroft Prize. He is president emeritus of the University of Richmond.

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