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Civil War Almanac: The Best Civil War Books of All Time

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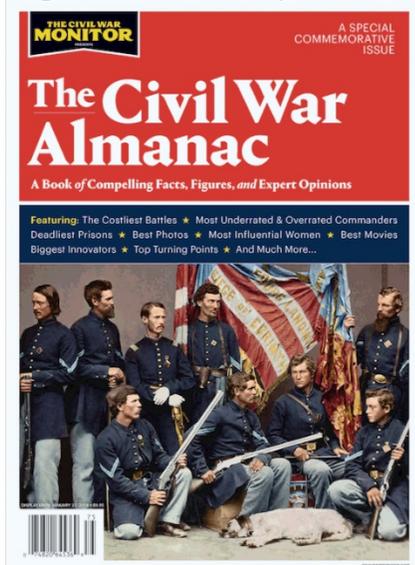
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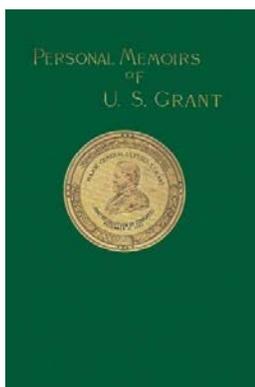
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For our latest newsstand-only special issue, [The Civil War Almanac](#), we asked a panel of Civil War historians—J. Matthew Gallman, Matthew C. Hulbert, James Marten, and Amy Murrell Taylor—for their opinions on a variety of popular topics, including the war's most overrated and underrated commanders, top turning points, most influential women, and best depictions on film. Space constraints prevented us from including their answers to one of the questions we posed: What are the 10 best Civil War books ever published (nonfiction or fiction)? Below are their responses.

J. Matthew Gallman:

1. Memoir. Ulysses S. Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* (1885). Often described as the best book by a U.S. President and the best memoir of the Civil War. (Confederate artilleryist Porter Alexander's memoir would be a close second.)



2. Lincoln. I am a huge fan of Eric Foner's *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (2010). For more traditional Lincoln biographies, I think the best from a very long shelf of titles are the one-volume biographies by David Donald and by Richard Carwardine.

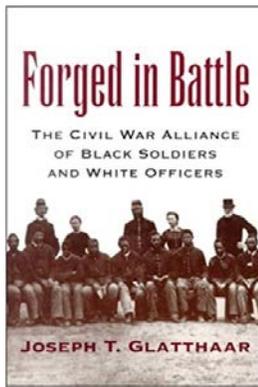
3. Lincoln and Civil Liberties. Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Fate of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln and Civil Liberties* (Oxford University Press). This is not really a Lincoln book so much as it is a complex analysis of civil liberties in wartime. Neely is yet another author who could have multiple titles on my list.

4. Wartime novel. Louisa May Alcott, *Hospital Sketches* (1863). Alcott's wonderful autobiographical novel about her experiences as a wartime nurse. Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) is a close second.

5. Soldier study. James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (1997). McPherson could have many volumes on this list, including *Battle Cry of Freedom*. His study of soldiers' motivations is deeply researched and theoretically sophisticated.

6. Women and War. Drew Gilpin Faust's *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (1996) is my choice from another wonderfully deep subfield.

7. African-American soldiers. Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (1990). This is now a huge subfield, but Glatthaar's book is still foundational as a study of both the men of the U.S.C.T. and their white officers.



8. Escape Narrative. William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860). This is my favorite in a genre full of powerful stories. William and Ellen Craft escaped from slavery when Ellen posed as a free black man, and William pretended to be her slave.

9. Wartime Politics. I am working on a study of wartime Democrats. With that in mind, I give a nod to Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of the Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (1983). (Although Joel Sibey's 1977 study of the wartime Democrats merits consideration as well.)

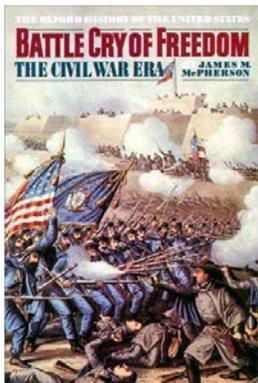
10. Modern novel. I am a big fan of E.L. Doctorow's *The March: A Novel* (2006), a fictional account of events during Sherman's March to the Sea. Geraldine Brooks' similarly titled, and wildly different, *March* (2005) is also wonderful.

J. Matthew Gallman is a professor of history at the University of Florida. His most recent book, Defining Duty in the Civil War: Personal Choice, Popular Culture, and the Union Home Front (2105), won the Bobbie and John Nau Book Prize in American Civil War Era History.

Matthew C. Hulbert:

1. James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988)

I have defined "best" here as the books that have had the greatest combined influence on how historians write about the Civil War and how the American public has learned about, understood, and remembered the conflict. This in mind, as far and away the best-known overview of the Civil War for nearly 30 years, McPherson's Pulitzer-winning book has been used in untold classrooms to introduce Americans to their national bloodletting. For the general public, *Battle Cry* and its author have become synonymous with Civil War history.



2. Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb* (1943) & *The Life of Billy Yank* (1952)

Yes, I'm cheating with a double-pick—but these two books are more or less inseparable. Wiley practically invented social history in the context of Civil War soldiers. *Johnny Reb* will celebrate its diamond anniversary in 2018 and is still often the go-to source for information on the daily lives and routines of Confederate soldiers.

3. U. S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* (1885)

Many historians argue that Grant was the most important military figure of the entire Civil War. His memoir, finished just days before he succumbed to throat cancer, provides a revealing look at the victorious general and his outlook on the war. For my money, it is the most important memoir penned by any Civil War participant and provides invaluable insight into not just the war, but how the man who won it wanted both himself and the conflict to be remembered.

4. Edward Pollard, *The Lost Cause* (1866)

Pollard, a Virginia newspaper editor and ardent Confederate sympathizer, coined the term “Lost Cause” and began the commemorative process of disentangling rank-and-file southern soldiers from the stigma of defeat and the socio-economic ramifications of emancipation. His work is essentially the original foundation of the Lost Cause Movement and produced many of the states’ rights/slavery/secession talking points still prevalent today (and which were refined in Pollard’s 1868 follow-up *The Lost Cause Regained*).

5. David Blight, *Race and Reunion* (2001)

Though much more recent than some of the other titles listed, *Race and Reunion* is the foundational text of Civil War memory studies, a subfield that has exploded in popularity in the last two decades. Whether they agree with his thesis in whole, in part, or not at all, every subsequent scholar of social memory and the war has necessarily responded to Blight’s thesis.

6. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935)

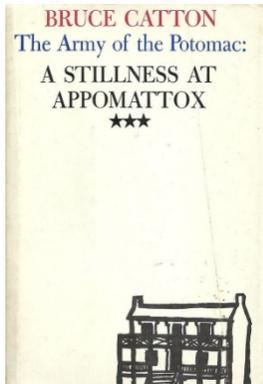
Though not considered the definitive title on Reconstruction, Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction* is ranked here ahead of Foner’s *Reconstruction* (which *is* considered by many to be the cornerstone work on the subject) because it was written and published at a time when the political and historiographical stakes were much higher. Du Bois brought black characters to the front of the Reconstruction story and struck back forcefully at the accounts of Dunning School historians, which were based in large part on contemporary, white supremacist views. In many ways, he built a launching pad for future historians of Reconstruction, Foner included.

7. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction* (1988)

As mentioned above, Foner’s *Reconstruction* has been considered by almost everyone to be the essential book on Reconstruction for nearly three decades. Like Blight’s *Race and Reunion*, it is the work to which all scholars of the subject must in some way respond, whether they agree or disagree with Foner’s conclusions.

8. Bruce Catton, *A Stillness at Appomattox* (1953)

Until Ken Burns' *The Civil War* transformed Shelby Foote into the best-known popular historian of the Civil War, Catton had held that undisputed title for decades. *Stillness* is probably Catton's best-known title (it took home a Pulitzer Prize), but it's worth noting that his collective corpus of work has inspired untold Americans from multiple generations—including many professional historians—to study the Civil War.



9. Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering* (2008)

For historians and general readers alike, Faust captured the Civil War—and more importantly, all that it destroyed—in relatable, humanistic terms. The first fact everyone learns about the Civil War is who won; the second is how many men were killed. This is the seminal work on death and how it was understood, coped with, and reimagined by the generation that actually fought the war.

10. Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants* (1942–1944)

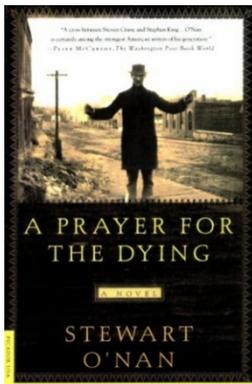
Despite his association with Lost Cause commemoration, Freeman was a pioneer in the military history of the Civil War. Unlike Wiley, who focused on the common soldier, Freeman analyzed the Army of Northern Virginia and its chain of command from the top down—casting a fascinating light on how the army worked, moved, and fought as a hierarchical unit.

Matthew C. Hulbert teaches American history at Texas A&M University–Kingsville. He is the author of The Ghosts of Guerrilla Memory: How Civil War Bushwhackers Became Gunslingers in the American West (2016), which won the 2017 Wiley–Silver Prize.

James Marten:

1. Stewart O’Nan, *A Prayer for the Dying* (1999)

Riveting novel of the gradual unravelling of a Civil War veteran turned town marshal—clearly suffering from PTSD—as a forest fire and a deadly epidemic threatens his small town in 1870s Wisconsin. War memory, horror, and a vivid portrayal of postwar life are all crowded into this brisk, 200-page book.



2. Geraldine Brooks, *March* (2005)

I'm kind of a sucker for novels that tell the hidden stories behind famous ones, and this account of the wrenching experiences of the father who leaves his “Little Women” behind when he goes off to be an army chaplain is a wonderful example of the genre. His experiences in battle, in a contraband camp, in the hospital, and—well, I won't spoil the most surprising thing he does—functions not only as a Civil War narrative in its own right, but as a way of providing texture for the original text.

3. Michael Shaara, *The Killer Angels* (1974)

The Pulitzer Prize-winning classic novel still resonates, despite the many lesser sequels and prequels by Shaara's son that tarnished its legacy. Shaara's strengths are his accessible dialogue and John Keegan-esque ability to imagine men's responses to war.

4. Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (1998)

A still—perhaps increasingly—relevant examination of Civil War memory in the late 20th century South. Horwitz's pivot at the midway point to cover a murder trial in Kentucky leads to a serious discussion of race relations that turns this into a book that is not only an entertaining read, but also an important one.

5. Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (1997)

See my thoughts on the movie version of this novel.

6. Robert Hicks, *Widow of the South* (2005)

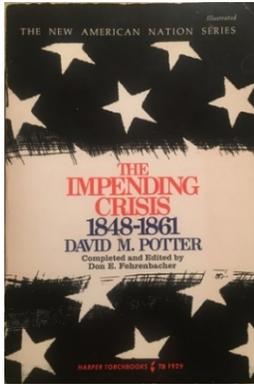
A war novel and an aftermath novel—the opening chapters feature the senseless and bloody battle of Franklin—this sensitive portrayal of the ways in which death was the central experience of the war, both for soldiers and civilians, even long after the fighting ended. Although infused with the dying and the dead, the novel is less sad or tragic than elegiac.

7. Ernest J. Hopkins, ed., *The Civil War Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce* (1970)

There are many groupings of Bierce war stories, but this edition brings them all together. The most piercing portrayal by a participant of the worst human qualities inspired by the war: incoherent loyalty, senseless courage, and inevitable cruelty—with a touch of the whimsical and a little magical realism.

8. David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (1977)

Not really a Civil War book, but crucial to understanding all other Civil War books. I still assign this to graduate students as an example of historical writing at its best and for its deployment of the concept of irony to the sectional conflict.



9. Bruce Catton, *Army of the Potomac Trilogy* (*Mr. Lincoln's Army* [1951], *Glory Road* [1952], and *A Stillness at Appomattox* [1953])

Wonderful narratives with what modern readers might find deeper-than expected analyses of both military and political events; I'm quite sure these are the books that convinced me that studying history was the bomb.

10. Harold Keith, *Rifles for Watie* (1957)

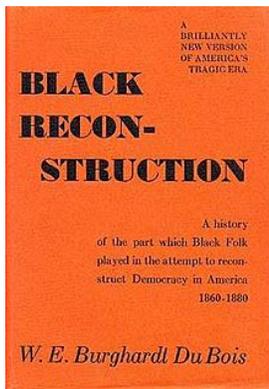
Somewhat implausible tale of a teenager helping smuggle guns to the Confederate Cherokee general Stand Watie—but one of the first Civil War books I read and with a take on a relatively unexplored (in fiction, at least) theaters of the war. It also contains one of the first, admittedly G-rated, make-out scenes I ever read, which I still remember fondly.

James Marten is a professor of history at Marquette University. His most recent books are Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America (2011) and America's Corporal: James Tanner in War and Peace (2014).

Amy Murrell Taylor:

1. W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* (1935)

Every time I think I have discovered something new about Emancipation and Reconstruction, I open up this book and find out that DuBois already got there—back in 1935. A vast survey of the transition from slavery to freedom, the book anticipated what is now the conventional scholarly wisdom about the agency of African Americans in the immediate post-slavery period.



2. Geraldine Brooks, *March* (2005)

This re-imagining of *Little Women*'s March family takes as its focus the wartime experience of Mr. March as a Union chaplain. The result is a powerful look at what happens when the idealism of a northerner like March meets the realities of warfare in the South. Brooks does an especially good job of exploring the tangled process of Emancipation experienced and witnessed by March.

3. Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* (2003)

The first of two companion books to the monumental digital archive, *The Valley of the Shadow* (disclosure: I worked on that project long ago), gives us a “ground-level” view of the war that feels just short of going back in time and experiencing it for ourselves. Ayers beautifully weaves together all the threads of everyday life—political, economic, social—in two communities, never losing sight of the war’s big picture (even when his protagonists could not always see it for themselves).

4. Charles Dew, *Apostles of Disunion* (2001)

It’s short for a Civil War book but packs an enormous punch. Dew’s review of the work of the secession commissioners—and in particular, his exposure of their words and arguments—forever dispenses with the question of why the South seceded. No one can deny it was about slavery after reading this book.

5. Sam Watkins, *Company Aytch* (1882)

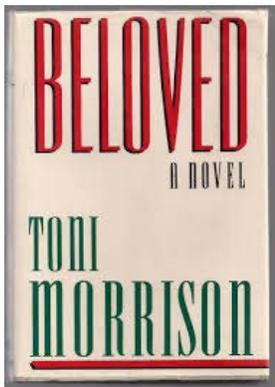
My students are often surprised to see that a Civil War American had a sense of humor. But what makes Sam Watkins’ account of his time as a private in Co. H, 1st Tennessee Infantry, through Shiloh and Chickamauga, most poignant is his determination to cut through the romanticization of his fellow 1880s memoirists and get the “real war”—the drilling, killing, and shooting—into the books.

6. Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial* (2010)

Arguably the best of many books on Abraham Lincoln and emancipation. Foner carefully walks readers through the president’s personal and political evolution on slavery, emancipation, and race, and in the process makes sense of what can seem, at first glance, to be puzzling inconsistencies in the president’s positions.

7. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)

It’s not ordinarily classified as a “Civil War” book, but maybe that’s because we have not paid close enough attention to the ordeal of those who became free in that era. Morrison’s novel offers an enormously powerful meditation on the haunting memories of slavery that lingered long after its destruction.



8. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (1992)

A collection of path-breaking essays exploring how gender shaped the beliefs and the actions of Civil War Americans. Few other books influenced my early development as a historian, and changed the way I look at the past, as much as this one.

9. Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African-American Kinship in the Civil War Era* (1997)

This volume from the magisterial series, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*, presents the words and writings of enslaved and newly freed people that for a long time sat inside dusty boxes at the National Archives. Now readers can explore for themselves, through the eyes of those who became free, what it was like to experience emancipation during the Civil War.

10. Nancy Disher Baird, ed., *Josie Underwood's Civil War Diary* (2009)

We are fortunate to have many vivid diarists of the Civil War, especially women, but I keep coming back to this one. Underwood's lively, intimate account of living in Bowling Green, Kentucky, reveals what it was like to be part of a prominent slaveholding family that sided with the Union despite its opposition to Lincoln. It's an account of tangled loyalties and strained relationships in a divided border state, and there's something about Josie's voice that keeps me coming back to it. (A second part of the diary was published in the *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* in 2014.)

Amy Murrell Taylor is an associate professor of history at the University of Kentucky. Her latest work, Embattled Freedom: Journeys Through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps, is due out in 2018.