



An Environmental History of the Civil War by Judkin Browning and Timothy Silver.

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There are thousands upon thousands of books on the American Civil War, but only a handful mention the Pleistocene epoch (2.4 million–11,700 years ago). *An Environmental History of the Civil War*, by military historian Judkin Browning and environmental historian Timothy Silver (both Appalachian State Univ.) begins shortly after Fort Sumter, but ranges from the geologic past to the war's battlefields as they are preserved today.

Chapter 1, "Sickness: Spring–Winter 1861," concerns the effects of diseases—childhood, tropical, and venereal—that afflicted the armies assembling to fight America's deadliest conflict. Training camps, we learn, became incubators for major outbreaks of measles and mumps, because thousands of young men, many from rural areas, who had not been exposed to these childhood diseases were suddenly training, eating, and sleeping together in tent cities. Two motifs introduced here recur in later chapters: first, the Civil War was reciprocal. Northern commanders and their men feared the malaria and yellow fever spread by southern mosquitoes, while the Rebels suffered from communicable diseases like smallpox brought by northern invaders. Second, the North almost invariably enjoyed far greater access to resources. Malaria was the rare disease that could be treated effectively in 1862, and the Union imported and distributed over a million ounces of quinine during the war, while the North's naval blockade of southern ports and tight control of land routes made it unobtainable in the Confederacy.

In chapter 2, "Weather: Winter 1861–Fall 1862," the authors begin with floods in California. This surprising choice allows them to include a brief narrative of the little-known conflict in the West,¹ as well as account for the continental, even global, sources of rainstorms and droughts during the war.

Like the California floods, the wet weather that facilitated Grant's success at Fort Henry and Fort Donelson, and led to the bloodbath at Shiloh, occurred in the middle of the "Civil War Drought." However, just as in the West everyday conditions often varied considerably from the climatic trend. During a La Niña winter, the polar jet stream—the fast-flowing swath of air that transports weather fronts west to east across North America—typically dips into the Ohio Valley. When that happens, extended periods of heavy rain or snow can fall sporadically across Kentucky and Tennessee even in years of less-than-average annual precipitation. The Appalachian Mountains also intercept systems moving in from the West—just as they did in 1862—and deposit the moisture as rain or snow on the western slopes. The eastern ridges often receive less precipitation, a micro version of the process that creates drier climates east of the Sierras and Rockies. (50)

Much of this chapter is devoted to the story of Maj. Gen. George McClellan's ill-fated attack on Richmond in 1862, though it refers as well to battles and campaigns across the continent throughout the war.

1. On which, see further Megan Kate Nelson, *The Three-Cornered War: The Union, the Confederacy, and Native Peoples in the Fight for the West* (NY: Scribner, 2020), with my review at *MiWSR* 2020-035.

Chapter 3, “Food: Fall 1862–Summer 1863,” explains why the Confederacy was unable to feed either its army or its civilian population, a state of affairs that spurred food riots headed by women in many southern cities; the April 1863 riot in Richmond is the best known. As usual, the North fared better. Browning and Silver show how northern agriculture provisioned a well nourished army, while still exporting massive quantities of grain to Europe. This was the first war to feature food cans. As a southern soldier finding an abandoned Union camp in Virginia remarked, “The whole country around here is bright with tin cans used by the Yanks for vegetables, condensed milk, lobster, oysters, fruit & everything else” (91). This chapter, though well sourced and argued, is the least novel part of the book. The starving men in gray are familiar from *Gone With the Wind* and many recent books on the Confederate home front and the role of women in the food riots.²

Chapter 4, “Animals: Summer 1863–Spring 1864,” is the volume’s strongest. It focuses on the two crucial creatures of the war: the horses that powered it and the hogs that fed it. The authors begin by tabulating the horses and mules living in the North and South when the war began; we learn here that mares are pregnant for eleven months and that only horses at least four years old are strong enough for military service. This means that, even if Union Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs had begun to set about breeding horses when Fort Sumter fell, not a single mount would have been ready until after Appomattox. Nonetheless, as usual, the North’s superior wealth and organization provided sufficient horses for Union cavalry, wagon teams, and artillery caissons throughout the war. By contrast, Rebels walked. Barefoot. The authors note too that, while it may be true that Traveller, Robert E. Lee’s trusty steed, survived the war to be buried near him, “an estimated 75 percent of the South’s military horses died every year” (113).

Pigs, of course, were meant to die: the armies marched on bellies full of bacon. The authors always express figures for salt pork in *millions* of pounds. The hogs of the antebellum South were lean and mean, forced to forage in woods and harvested fields. In the Midwest, by contrast, pigs were fattened on grain and became much larger and largely lard. After the war, the devastated South began importing pork from the Midwest. Several times, the book brings its stories right up to 2020. “Strange as it may seem, the Civil War might be partly responsible for the comparatively high rates of obesity, high blood pressure, stroke and heart disease in the South, a trend that began in the nineteenth century and persists to the present” (192).

Much of chapter 5, “Death and Disability: Spring 1864–Fall 1864,” concerns the usual horror stories of Civil War soldiers’ bullet wounds infected with gangrene or infested with maggots. But Browning and Silver do manage to find some positive notes.

Despite the common perception among soldiers and the public, Civil War hospitals continued to develop more efficient care as the war progressed. In 1861, the nation’s prewar army had only one forty-bed hospital; by war’s end, Union and Confederate authorities had established 400 hospitals with a total of over 400,000 beds for patients. Washington had one hospital in 1861 but 50 by 1865. In Richmond, the Confederate medical bureau established Chimborazo hospital—the largest hospital complex in the world—with 150 buildings and 8,000 beds spread over 125 acres. By the end of the war, Chimborazo had treated over 76,000 patients. More than 1 million Union soldiers were treated in a hospital during the war, and fewer than 10 percent of those patients died during the war. After the war, European armies copied the American hospital system and modeled their medical care on the American practices developed during the conflict. (155)

2. E.g., Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2010), and Andrew Smith, *Starving the South: How the North Won the Civil War* (NY: St. Martin’s, 2011).

The final chapter, “Terrain: Fall 1864–Spring 1865,” explores how the American landscape affected fighting and how combat affected the land. Throughout the book, the authors describe how swamps and mud slowed armies and how even modest hills like Little Round Top (elevation 150 feet) made a critical difference at Gettysburg. But almost all the fighting took place in the South; many areas around Richmond were virtually deforested. That and other damage to the soil affected the former Confederacy for generations.

Although much of the material on food shortages, medical care, and death has been covered in great depth elsewhere,³ *Environmental History of the Civil War* is a most excellent study of aspects of the war ignored in many accounts of the conflict.

3. E.g., in Drew Gilpin Faust’s *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (NY: Knopf, 2008), with review at *MiWSR* 2008.05.03. To their credit, Browning and Silver cite her work and hundreds of other primary and secondary sources in their twenty-one pages of endnotes, augmented by an extensive bibliography and index.