Something Old, Something New: Canada and the American Civil War

AN EXPLOSION OF POPULAR and scholarly interest in the American Civil War took place in the United States in the 1990s. But even as the popular historical gaze in the United States shifts elsewhere,[1] the 1990s Civil War infatuation has enduring meaning. What was uncommon about Americans' fascination with their Civil War was the depth of their attraction to it, which had much to do with the new ways in which the subject itself was pitched. In myriad productions ranging from Ken Burns's masterful nine-part television documentary to James McPherson's scholarly and accessible studies of Union and Confederate soldiers' motivations for fighting, the Civil War was cast manifestly as a *people's* war. Lincoln, Grant, Davis, Lee and other leaders were presented as participants (albeit important ones) in a violent conversation among millions of other Americans, and their newly elevated stories and perspectives held equal allure. The Civil War was popular in large part because it was told "from the bottom up" to audiences that were interested principally in ordinary people's places in it.[2]

The late 20th-century popularity of the American Civil War reached well beyond the boundaries of the United States. Recent studies of the Civil War and its various effects on Canada, Britain, France and Mexico attest to the current influence of American historiography and American popular culture across the western world. It would be wrongheaded, of course, to suggest that recent scholarly interest in the Civil War among historians of these countries stemmed only from a slavish adherence to a topical agenda set in the United States. The trend was more than Americans figuratively "sneezing" and causing their neighbours and friends to "catch cold". The American Civil War had real and profound consequences for both foreign affairs and domestic politics in these countries, and the conflict plays an important part in their respective national narratives.[3]

Nevertheless, motivations to write history often differ from what motivates others

1 If widely promoted lecture tours, bestseller lists and public television topics reflect popular taste, then Abraham Lincoln and the "War Between the States" are now passé. In the 21st century, the focus is apparently on new appreciations and old criticisms of Revolution-era luminaries such as Thomas Jefferson and, even more recently, John Adams. These shifts are indeed common as popularity seems to be a very fleeting thing. See for example Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1997), *The Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York, 2001) and David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York, 2001).

2 Ken Burns, *The Civil War - A Film by Ken Burns* (PBS Home Video, 1990); James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York, 1998). Even a new sub-field, the "social history of the Civil War" has emerged. See for example Maris A. Vinovskis, ed., *Toward a Social History of the American Civil War: Exploratory Essays* (Cambridge, 1990), Anne C. Rose, *Victorian American and the Civil War* (New York, 1994) and J. Matthew Gallman, *Mastering Wartime: A Social History of Philadelphia during the Civil War* (Philadelphia, 2000).

3 See for example R.J.M. Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge, 2000), George M. Blackburn, *French Newspaper Opinion on the American Civil War* (Westport, Conn., 1997) and Harry Thayer Mahoney and Marjorie Locke Mahoney, *Mexico and the Confederacy, 1860-1867* (Bethesda, Maryland, 1997).

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to consume it. In the 1990s, the story of the American Civil War appealed to Canadians for reasons beyond purely academic interest and American cultural imperialism. Ushered in by the Free Trade Agreement in 1989 and later by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, a new, cautious version of continentalism was gradually embraced by most Canadians – once fears about the spectre of American domination through freer trade had been somewhat allayed. In this atmosphere, it seemed (and seems) useful to ask questions and learn more about points of historical convergence in the Canadian and American pasts. As important, though, was the re-emergence of Quebec separatism in the mid-1990s and questions of constitutional rights, terms of sovereignty and partition. Here, as the Princeton historian James McPherson argued in the 1998 CBC Barbara Frum Lecture in Toronto, the Civil War might provide a useful comparison. When one considers the conditions that led the South to rebel (powerlessness and ethnic nationalism), he noted, "the parallels [with present-day Quebec] are striking".[4] Canadians may have their own reasons to study the Civil War.

The recent re-release of two notably different books on the Civil War and its effects on British North America seems to confirm this suggestion. Robin W. Winks, *The Civil War Years: Canada and the United States* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998) is the fourth reissuing of the author's 1960 book.[5] When it first appeared in print, Winks's book was the authoritative work on Canadian-American relations during the 1860s and, in many respects, it remains so. It appears that Winks is clearly aware of this, as none of the text of the book has been revised since the first edition, and the author offers only a perfunctory five-page preface to the fourth edition where he cites and acknowledges the most important research on the subject that has been published since 1960: "I do not find that the body of that scholarship would lead me to recast any large parts of the text. . . . I believe the story as told here remains fundamentally correct"(pp. xi-xiii).

More than merely "correct", the story, or grand narrative, presented by Winks is structurally sound and stylistically rich, and these characteristics have given the work its enduring success. Winks claims in the preface to the first edition that the aim of the book is to contribute to the historiography of diplomacy, imperialism, the Civil War and the story of "Canadian nation-building", but it is the latter field on which his book has had its greatest impact. *The Civil War Years* has been the standard source on American influences on Confederation for two generations of Canadian survey-course textbook writers and university lecturers.

Based on impressive research in a wide array of Canadian, British and American archives, this book tells the story of how the destruction of one country created in

4 James McPherson, *Is Blood Thicker Than Water?: Crises of Nationalism in the Modern World* (Toronto, 1998) excerpted in *Saturday Night* magazine as "Quebec Whistles Dixie" (March 1998), pp. 13, 14, 18, 20, 22, 72. For some of the reaction to McPherson's comments, see Eric Beauchesne, "Signs of Civil War?", *Ottawa Citizen*, 15 March 1998 and Andy Holman, "Compromising Positions", *Saturday Night* (May 1998), p. 9.

5 The book was first published in 1960 by Johns Hopkins University Press and reprinted by Harvest House in 1971 and by the University Press of America in 1988. The book is a version of Winks's 1957 Johns Hopkins University Ph.D. thesis. The 1998 version, with title and subtitle reversed, is the first production by a Canadian publisher.

effect two new nations. More specifically, the book chronicles three factors between 1861 and 1865 which led to the involvement of British North Americans in the Civil War: British "neutrality" policies (looked upon by Americans as South-sympathizing); Yankee wariness of and hostility toward the British; and efforts by Confederates to embroil British North America in the conflict. As a result, British North America became an anticipated (if not real) battleground in the Civil War and many contemporaries fully expected a victorious North to use the occasion to finish the work of the American Revolution left undone in 1781. The Civil War made British North Americans anxious about their identities, defences and futures. Winks argues conventionally but effectively that the conflict provided one (though only one, he is careful to point out) important impetus toward the confederation of British American colonies in 1867.

Winks carves out five major periods based on the changing nature of Anglo-American relations in the Civil War era. In 1860 and early 1861, Britain, British North America and the United States enjoyed a period of warm relations due largely to a mutually beneficial Reciprocity Agreement (1854), the general anti-slavery tone among British newspapers and the friendly welcome that Americans held out to the visiting Prince of Wales in 1860. Northerners perceived their Canadian neighbours as like-minded and expected that should North-South tensions deteriorate, British North Americans could be counted on to sympathize or, at the very least, to stay out of the trouble. However, this situation changed quickly and dramatically between March 1861 and the late summer of 1862. When Lincoln chose to wage war against the rebels on the basis of an abstract legal principle (to preserve the Union and protect the Constitution) and not on moral principle (to end slavery), British North American newspapers objected loudly. Even more troubling was the behaviour of the Americans during the Trent Affair in November 1861, when the crew of an American naval vessel stopped and boarded a British packet and arrested two Confederate diplomats in their way to Europe. The event "crystallized wavering opinion" and "changed the several provinces from generally neutral or even pro-Northern onlookers at a foreign war into a generally anti-Northern land"(p. 101).

Winks's third period, between August 1862 and November 1863, was one of relative quietude. Though no major diplomatic event marked these months, British North Americans remained wary of Union aims and not even the Emancipation Proclamation convinced many that the war was about anything other than northern aggrandizement. Between late 1863 and the spring of 1865, Anglo-American antagonisms again boiled over, this time due to a deliberate Confederate strategy to start a "fire in the rear" of the Union Army. Confederate raids were launched from British American soil to free rebel prisoners from Johnson's Island in Lake Erie and to harass and plunder northern shipping and settlements, such as the well-known capture of the Union steamer *Chesapeake* in late 1863 and the sacking of St. Albans, Vermont in the autumn of 1864. Late in the war, British North America came as close as it ever had to becoming embroiled in the Civil War; cool diplomacy and Canadian promises to better enforce the doctrine of neutrality helped prevent military intervention, and by the spring of 1865, Anglo-American relations had once again warmed. By the early months of 1865, it was increasingly apparent to all observers that war's end was nigh, that the Union Army was exhausted and that Confederate attempts to involve British North America had failed. The outpouring of British North

Americans' grief after Lincoln's assassination was telling. The war's end stayed Canadian fears of annexation (at least immediately), but they were not forgotten.

This narrative is appealing because Winks captures the strategy and intrigue of mid-19th diplomacy so well. For the most part, this is a study of the relations between high-profile Anglo-American foreign service officers in very trying circumstances. The main players in his story are British and American statesmen, consuls and politicians – elite men such as Governor General Charles Stanley (Viscount) Monck, British Commissioner Richard B.P. (Lord) Lyons and John A. Macdonald, Lincoln, American Ambassador Charles Francis Adams and most of all Secretary of State William Seward. Winks expertly pieces together accounts and correspondence among these men and is careful to protect contemporary accounts from inaccuracies brought into the record by nostalgia and reminiscence. Moreover, the author captures the interplay between these statesmen, newspaper editors and "public opinion" and is careful never to conflate the views of these constituencies. From a careful, representative canvassing of editorials on the Civil War in the British North American media, Winks paints a big and convincing picture of the role of printed public discourse about the Civil War over time and how it was used by both British and American statesmen as a bellweather of domestic feeling and as a clarion for official declarations of policy.[6]

But there is no claim here to probe the depths of feeling about the War from ordinary men and women. After all, the unreconstructed *Civil War Years* was conceived and birthed well before the social history revolution of the 1970s took place. Where Winks is concerned with "public opinion" at all, his focus is on the highest levels of discourse and official debate and not on the "out-of-doors": "it mattered less what 'the people' thought of the Civil War than what Her Majesty's government chose to do about it"(p. 206). In this particular respect, the book shows its age and parts company most significantly from Greg Marquis's more recent production, *In Armageddon's Shadow: The Civil War and Canada's Maritime Provinces* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).[7]

The topical boundaries used by Marquis in his treatment of this subject are telling.

6 As careful as this account remains, four printings of the book have still not weeded out a handful of noticeable errors. The 1998 version reprints spelling mistakes concerning "Burmuda" (p. 263) and the names of Halifax Catholic Archbishop Thomas Connolly ("Connelly"[p. 267]) and future Canadian Prime Minister John Abbott ("Abbot" [p. 313]). Most unforgivable, however, is the misspelling of my hometown, St. Catharines ("St. Catherines" [p. 268]).

7 This review is based on the 2000 paperback release of the original hardcover published in 1998. In the paperback edition, a new preface has been added to provide more historical context for "readers unfamiliar with Canadian history"; that is, Americans. While presumably this afforded the opportunity to correct a small number of errors in the text, the errors remain. John Brain ("Brian" [p. 162]) and brig ("big" [p. 214]) are misspelled, as are the sites of some the hottest fighting in the war, the 1862 Battle of Fredericksburg, Marye's Heights ("Mayre's Height" [p. 117]) and the Cold Harbor campaign ("Cold Harbour" [p. 292]). American readers will be surprised to see the 1842 Treaty of Washington, or Webster-Ashburton Treaty, referred to more briefly as the "Ashburton Treaty" (p. 179). Also, it is now generally believed that Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson died not from pneumonia (p. 93), but from pyemia (blood poisoning), a consequence of his wounding at the Battle of Chancellorsville: see Marvin P. Rozear and Joseph. C. Greenfield, Jr., "'Let Us Cross Over the River': the Final Illness of Stonewall Jackson", *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 103, 1 (January 1995), pp. 29-46.

This book is about the attitudes toward and reactions to the American Civil War in the Maritime colonies of British North America – Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. Although he does not develop the argument plainly enough, the point implied is a good one. For the most part, the Maritime colonies experienced the American Civil War separately and with little reference to other British American colonies. Maritimers had their own longstanding economic, social and kinship ties with the United States, especially in New England. They had their own channels of discourse with Americans and American institutions and required no central filter (through the Colonial Office or Governor General, for example) to help them form opinions. And yet, though separate, Maritimers' responses to the Civil War seem to have differed little from those of Central Canadians or, for that matter, westerners. Initially openly pro-North, Maritimers became disenchanted with the Union's explanation for and prosecution of the war. Because of this, and an increasingly well-earned reputation as fuelling and repair bases for blockade runners, the Maritime colonies became objects of suspicion among Union leaders and diplomats. As the war's end approached, this antagonism waned and most Maritimers looked forward to a Union victory and the end of bloodshed, even as they remained anxious about the build-up of American military might.

Marquis's approach to this subject is as significant as his framework. Undeniably, the dominant narrative about British North America, 1861-65, has been about diplomacy and electoral politics. The war helped push Maritimers toward considering Confederation, "or so the textbooks tell us", the author notes (p. xix). In *In Armageddon's Shadow*, Marquis finds the view from below more appealing: "The crisis brought out intense feelings that revealed much about colonial society. Everyone had an opinion, most of them governed by emotion and folk belief, not reason"(p. xix). Much of this book is a social history of the Civil War in British North America, and the results are promising. This trajectory is reflected in the sources Marquis employs as well. If for Winks, the narrative about the Civil War in British North America is drawn mainly from the diplomatic brief, although government records and press reports do occupy a conspicuous place, Marquis finds as much of his material in "unofficial" sources such as private correspondence, travel diaries, reminiscences and other accounts.

This approach also informs the structure of the book, which is thematic in its presentation. Following an introductory chapter that paints a landscape of Maritime opinion about the War in 1860-61, the author examines in successive chapters Maritime trade, views on race, American migrants in the colonies ("refugees, crimps, spies, and skedaddlers") and Maritime enlistments in the Union and Confederate armies. His treatment in later chapters of the peculiarly maritime issues of piracy, privateering and blockade running is also interesting, although stories of Bluenose "Confederate" pirates boarding the Union *Chesapeake* and the daring cruise of the Confederate *Tallahassee* into Nova Scotia waters during the summer of 1864 are hardly new. Marquis's presentation is full, well-researched and focused as well on the reactions of ordinary Maritimers to such belligerent activity so close to home.

It is clear that this was a period of significant cultural reckoning and social formation, and in his concluding chapter, the author assesses the broader meaning of the American Civil War to Maritimers. More than merely a political catalyst, the Civil War provided a cultural mirror by which Maritimers could and did reflect on their

own attitudes toward republicanism, national identity, morality and race. What they saw in the mirror was a colonial society composed of a congeries of attitudes and ideas on these matters. The Civil War did not help Maritimers (or Canadians for that matter) resolve their identity differences, but at least it pushed them to recognize and discuss them.

The promise of a social and cultural history of the Maritimes' Civil War experience in *In Armageddon's Shadow* is not wholly fulfilled, however. Marquis is to be credited with opening this conceptual door, but he does step through it very far. The ways in which the martial imagery of the war entered public discourse – in electoral campaigns and in commercial advertising, for example – is a subject he introduces but does not explore in much detail. The impact of horrific warfare on "manhood" and the construction of gender are subjects of some importance in the American literature but only touched upon in Marquis's work. His account of New Brunswicker Emma Edmunds, the Union nurse, cross-dressing soldier and spy, is interesting but cultivated not nearly enough. "Soldiering is a rigid school but a good one", Marquis quotes a Saint John-born Union volunteer. "[I]f there is any man in his makeup it will bring it out"(p. 127). Fair enough; but what did he mean? Finally, some of the most interesting pages in this book are the final ones, where Marquis assesses how the Civil War has been remembered in Maritime folklore since Confederation. The absence of statuary dedicated to Maritime Civil War veterans does not mean that the Civil War was not part of regional memory. He argues, albeit too briefly, that the Maritimes has its own invented tradition about the Civil War, the best example of which involves the inclusion in a 1932 Nova Scotia school reader of the story of the Confederate ship *Tallahassee*. How strong this memory was and how it played against competing historical memories about British imperial and military accomplishments is something that should be pursued further.

Marquis's approach to the Civil War is important as a complement (though not necessarily a corrective) to Winks's take. The appearance of these two books on the market so close upon one another provides an interesting moment of comparison. They are historiographical brackets of sorts and demonstrate in their treatment of a common subject how much has changed in the writing and reading of history in the past 40 years as well as how much has remained the same. "The classic account of the war's impact on British North America", Marquis avers in an endnote, "is Winks, *Canada and the United States*"(p. 296).[8] But the strength of Marquis's own work is that it pushes ahead to suggest new ways of looking at an old subject.

Canadians have for some time had their own important reasons to examine the American Civil War. "Continentalism, for good or ill, is triumphant"(p. 380), Winks wrote in the Cold War environment of the 1950s, and the same might be said again of

8 There is very little disagreement expressed between Winks and Marquis in their books. Winks refers to Marquis's book (first edition) as "rich", with a useful bibliography, and Marquis cites Winks several times in his endnotes. The only direct criticism that Marquis has of Winks concerns the estimation of British American recruits in the Union and Confederate armies. Marquis says 50,000 is probably correct, of whom about 10,000 were Maritimers. Winks has lower estimates and suggests it is impossible to know the exact number of British North Americans who participated, but that 50,000 seems unlikely. Also, Marquis claims that Winks is in error in his account of the attempted arrest of the *Chesapeake* pirate John Brain.

the 1990s. As NAFTA, the media and the politics of globalization draw Canada and the United States closer together, a look at the Civil War helps remind Canadians of the countries' significant differences in their political origins and constitutional structures. And yet, in these times, readers on both sides of the border are likely to be drawn to this subject as much for its social meaning as for its political resonance. The Civil War was indeed a *people's* war, the most recent research tells us, and at the end of the 1990s, it owes its popular appeal to those writers and others who have told the story from the bottom up.

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