

George Mason University, Department of History, Spring 2021

**History 617 DL1:
READING SEMINAR IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR ERA**

Professor Christopher H. Hamner
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Mondays, 7:30-10:00
[Course BlackBoard site](#)

The American experiment in self-government was scarcely eighty years old when the Civil War threatened to tear the country permanently in two. The massive cataclysm lasted four years, sacrificed 750,000 lives, freed some four million enslaved Blacks, and touched virtually every American in some manner. It redefined the social, political, and economic fabric of the country in ways that still reverberate today in 2021. Historical scholarship on the Civil War era has produced some of the most significant and contentious debates about the nature of the United States, its people, its government, and its values.

This readings seminar offers students an opportunity to familiarize themselves with some of the broad contours of scholarship surrounding the conflict and its aftereffects. Over the course of the semester, students will read widely in the history of the era, studying some classic works alongside some of the most important recent scholarship.

The goals of the seminar are threefold. Students will gain a broad understanding of the recent scholarship on the Civil War era; they will become familiar with the historiographic debates that have defined the field over the past quarter-century; and they will practice analyzing, critiquing, and connecting scholarly arguments, both in writing and in group discussions.

Reading List

Daina Ramey Berry, *Price for the Pound of Their Flesh*
Charles Dew, *Apostles of Disunion*
George Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!*
Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over*
David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*
Edward Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* or *The Thin Light of Freedom*
Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom*
Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*
Drew Gilpin Faust, *Republic of Suffering*

In addition to the above, there are two weeks in which we will draw from a pool of books.

For our session on master narrative, select one of:

Allen Guelzo, *Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction*
James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*
Louis Masur, *The Civil War: A Concise History*
Adam I. P. Smith, *The American Civil War*

For our session on Reconstruction, select one of:

Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*
John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War*
Bruce Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie*

Assignments and Grading

Class performance in the course will be assessed across three categories: contributions to class discussion, academic book reviews, and a written examination at the end of the semester.

1. Participation: Participation in every class discussion is a vital part of an effective seminar. The ability to think critically in the moment, and to present one's ideas within a discussion, is a vital trait in the historical profession. Effective participation in a graduate seminar comprises several skills: *preparing* for discussion, *contributing* to the give-and-take of an academic conversation, and *following* effectively the contributions of others in order to advance the analysis collaboratively. The book discussions offer class members an opportunity to develop those skills in an encouraging environment. Participation is weighted heavily in the course grade precisely because being prepared to discuss each week's material in a thoughtful manner is so important to professional development.

Every student should expect to participate actively in *every* discussion this semester. Note that "active participation" is not the same as "attending." For the purposes of the course requirements, plan to pose or answer one question, and offer one original insight, in every session. (This is a bare minimum; students should aim to participate much more frequently than that, but these benchmarks reflect an acceptable baseline level of participation in our discussions.) Students who do not come to class prepared to participate thoughtfully in *every* discussion should not expect to pass the course.

To aid in preparation for seminar, students will frequently be asked to bring a short thought, question, or response to the week's reading (specifics will be circulated the week before each discussion) to share at the beginning of the class. In aggregate, these responses will initiate the longer discussion that week and help ensure that every student contributes at least one idea to each discussion. Reading questions circulated in advance of each week's discussion will provide indicators about where the conversation in seminar is likely to go in order to aid your preparations for seminar.

2. Book reviews: Each student will prepare three 750-word book reviews on monographs from the course reading list.

Book reviews should follow the standard format for academic book reviews demonstrated in *The Journal of Military History*, *The Journal of American History*, or the *American Historical Review*. The review should briefly introduce the work (its topic, its author, the details of its publication) before analyzing the substance of the author's discussion. What questions does the book seek to address? What is the author's argument? What kind of evidence does the author employ to support that argument? How effective is the argument? Why? What are the book's chief strengths and weaknesses? Fitting that information into a brief essay is enormously challenging; writing reviews offers class participants practice in synthesis, criticism, and brevity—essential skills for the professional historian.

The choice of which books to review is up to each student. Reviews are due in class the day the book is discussed; no late reviews will be accepted. Students are free to do *more* than three reviews, in which case only the three best reviews will count toward the final grade. This is an excellent opportunity to improve your ability in this critical kind of writing if you have determined that this is an area you would like to strengthen.

Book reviews should be submitted through the class Bb portal.

3. Written exam: The written component of the seminar is modeled on the minor field exams that Mason doctoral students complete as part of their 804 minor field courses. The exam will feature two questions that invite you to think about the readings and scholars we will discuss this semester as a whole. Written exams are historiographic in nature: answering the questions requires you to consider the works as a body of scholarship in conversation with one another, and as a conversation that has evolved over time. That is an extremely useful exercise not just for students who intend to pursue doctoral study. The process of preparing for and sitting the exam helps develop a set of core skills critical to *all* scholars at every level.

The exam will feature two questions. Each essay will take the form of an 8-10 page essay (approximately 2,000 words), and each should present an argument in response to the question. That argument should reflect your understanding of the academic conversation between books from our readings; that kind of intellectual synthesis is one of the best ways to verify that you have mastered the material at a level appropriate to an academic historian. You should be thinking about the connections between the monographs and articles on the reading list as you make your way through them through the course of the semester.

The exam will take place from April 20 to April 30, giving you ten days to write up your answers. Questions will arrive the morning of Tuesday April 20, and will be due at 5pm on Friday, April 30.

You may use your notes from your reading and from class discussions in your exam answers. You may NOT do additional online research during the exam itself in preparing your answers. All of the ideas and arguments in your essays should be your own.

To help prepare for the exam at the semester's end, students should formulate a draft question of their own and submit it by **Monday, April 5**. We will discuss the questions, and analyze what makes for a successful comprehensive question, the following week.

Absences: Because in-class participation is such a significant part of the course, students should plan to be at every discussion session. Life intervenes on occasion, however. If you know that you will miss a class, notify me beforehand. You can make up one absence by submitting a book review for the monograph covered in the missed session. A review submitted to substitute for a missed class **will not** count toward the three required book reviews for the semester.

This is a one-time substitution; do not think of class attendance or a book review as an either/or option. I expect every student to be in class and participating actively unless notified in advance.

Final grades will break down as follows:

Class contributions:	30%
Book reviews:	10% each
Draft exam question	10%
Written exam:	30%

Class Schedule

WEEK 1: Introductions and expectations

January 25

Isaac R. Pennypacker. "Civil War Historians and History." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (1927), pp.330-350. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20086649>

J. G. Randall, "The Civil War Restudied." *The Journal of Southern History* 6, no. 4 (1940): 439-57. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2192164>

Stephen Berry, Michael T. Bernath, Seth Rockman, Barton A. Myers, Anne Marshall, Lisa M. Brady, Judith Giesberg, and Jim Downs. "The Future of Civil War Era Studies." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 1 (2012): 3-10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26070189>

WEEK 2: Master Narrative and the Civil War era

February 1

One of the following:

Allen Guelzo, *Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction*

James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*

Louis Masur, *The Civil War: A Concise History*

Adam I. P. Smith, *The American Civil War*

David S. Reynolds. "Reading the Sesquicentennial: New Directions in the Popular History of the Civil War." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 3 (2012): 421-35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26070251>.

WEEK 3: Slavery in America

February 8

Daina Ramey Berry, *Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation*

Gaines M. Foster, "Guilt Over Slavery: A Historiographical Analysis." *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 56, No. 4 (Nov., 1990), pp. 665-694. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2210932>

WEEK 4: Political history and the crisis of the 1850s

February 15

Charles Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War*

J. G. Randall, "The Blundering Generation." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 27, no. 1 (1940): 3-28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1896569>

WEEK 5: Battle history

February 22

George Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!*

Joseph T. Glatthaar, “The ‘New’ Civil War History: An Overview.” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 115, no. 3 (1991): 339-69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20092630>

WEEK 6: The soldiers’ perspective

March 1

Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War*

Pete Maslowski, “A Study of Morale in Civil War Soldiers.” *Military Affairs* 34, no. 4 (1970): 122-26
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1986780>

William F. Pinar. “The Gendered Civil War in the South.” *Counterpoints* 163 (2001): 237-70.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42977754>

WEEK 7: SPRING BREAK(ish)—CIVIL WAR MOVIE NITE!!!

March 8

Gone with the Wind (1939)

Glory (1989)

The Civil War miniseries (1990)

Gettysburg (1993)

Cold Mountain (2003)

Lincoln (2012)

The Retrieval (2013)

Free State of Jones (2016)

Harriet (2019)

Gillian Brockell, “Re-Watching *The Civil War* during the Breonna Taylor and George Floyd Protests,”
Washington Post, September 26, 2020
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/09/26/ken-burns-civil-war-breonna-taylor-george-floyd-shelby-foote/>

WEEK 8: Biography

March 15

David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*

WEEK 10: Social history and the Civil War

March 22

Edward Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America, 1859-1864*

or

The Thin Light of Freedom: The Civil War and Emancipation in the Heart of America

Maris A. Vinovskis. "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations." *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 1 (1989): 34-58.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1908343>

WEEK 11: Environmental history and the war

March 29

Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction*

Jeffrey S. Sartin. "Infectious Diseases during the Civil War: The Triumph of the 'Third Army.'" *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 16, no. 4 (1993): 580-84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4457020>

WEEK 12: The Confederacy reconsidered

April 5

Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*

Yael A. Sternhell. "Revisionism Reinvented? The Antiwar Turn in Civil War Scholarship." *Journal of the Civil War Era*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (June 2013), pp. 239-256. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26062047>

ASSIGNMENT: Compose a sample exam questions that you would pose if *you* were administering the written exam. Be ready to talk briefly with the class about how and why you have formulated your questions, and what you would expect to be in a satisfactory response. Submit your question to the Bb portal by 5pm.

WEEK 13: War and memory

April 12

Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*

David W. Blight. "'What Will Peace among the Whites Bring?': Reunion and Race in the Struggle over the Memory of the Civil War in American Culture." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1993, pp. 393-410. www.jstor.org/stable/25090451

WEEK 14: Reconstruction

April 19

One of the following:

Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*

Bruce Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution That Transformed the South*

John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War*

Aaron Sheehan-Dean. "The Long Civil War: A Historiography of the Consequences of the Civil War."

The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, vol. 119, no. 2, 2011, pp. 106–153.

www.jstor.org/stable/41310737.

WEEK 15: Written exam

Two written exam questions will go out on Tuesday, April 20. Essays are due at 5pm on Friday, April 30. Submit your answers as one (1) Word document via the Bb portal.