



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Last Best Hope: International Lives of the American Civil War

A Conversation with **David Quigley**
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April 28, 2011

OWENS: Can you begin by talking about what brought you to your current project? Why did you choose to focus on the international, global aspect of this huge American event?

QUIGLEY: The more I thought about American cities in the 19th century—and especially in the period of the Civil War—the more I realized that the lives of Americans who were living in that era were profoundly international. Immigrant communities, groups of international reformers, and a host of movements of people in and out of the United States through this period all profoundly shaped the development of political thought, social movements, and the culture of the cities I was studying.

At the same time, my interest in the Civil War through an international lens comes out of a development in American historiography over the last 10 or 15 years. My graduate school advisor, Tom Bender at NYU, has been an important leader in the recent and ongoing move to the history of “America in the world.” Today one comes across a range of positions advertised around the country for historians who specialize in “America and the world”, but when I was in graduate school and first coming out, you would not have found such a position.

Tom pulled together a series of conferences in the 1990s at La Pietra outside of Florence, including very interesting communities of scholars from the United States and around the world who studied the United States to think about how America and its past look somewhat different depending on your perspective and your national background.

For example, there is an interesting piece in this week's *Chronicle of Higher Education* by Shane White, an Australian historian who studies 19th century New York. He is a terrific cultural and social historian of ordinary African Americans, and his newest book is on gambling in Harlem between the wars. It is a great piece; he argues that he is able to gain special value and insights because he is writing about New York City from the other side of the globe.

In conversation with Tom and others as part of this movement in the 1990s, I realized that, in a lot of ways, the one outstanding part of the American past that has not really been interrogated through this international lens is the era of the Civil War. This is in some ways understandable because the 19th century has not been a part of the conversation. Up until 1800 or so, American history is Colonial history with a series of European and Atlantic empires that America was a part of and on the periphery of. After 1898, and certainly when you get to World War I and beyond, America is rising into and established in world-power status, so American history in the 20th century is necessarily intertwined with world history.

The 19th century is a different kind of beast and so it has been fun to try and think through and also collaborate with people doing this kind of work. Ed Rugemer, a former Boston College graduate student, completed a terrific project that came out of this kind of thinking and has ended up winning many of the major prizes in U.S. history. He is now on the faculty at Yale and has continued seeking to understand the deepening sectional animosities in the 1830s, '40s and '50s. How can we study the American sectional crisis without understanding that the British emancipation in the West Indies, the important shifts in British, Caribbean and Atlantic thought, and the experience of slavery would have a dramatic impact on the states?

It has been interesting to be part of a larger conversation about what we think about 19th century lives on a broader canvas. At the same time, it has been interesting to figure out how to take an experience like the Civil War, where there are tens of thousands of books and so many different directions to go with it—especially once you introduce the world of the 1850s, '60s and '70s—and rein it in and make it somewhat more coherent.

OWENS: One of the things that struck me about your title was the multiple meanings of the word “lives.” I understood it to mean not only the human lives you study, but also the life-span of the story or myth of the Civil War as it was received abroad, over time. What did the American Civil War mean to the world as it happened, and in the generations that followed?

QUIGLEY: There are various ways of getting at this. I am interested this year to start paying attention as we have our sesquicentennial celebration. Every time we have a

commemoration of the Civil War, we can find telling evidence internally in the United States about how people think about the past. Some of the best moments to find out about international thoughts about both the Civil War and contemporary ideas about America come in 1911 to 1915, 1961 to 1965 and likely now over these next four years.

In a lot of places, Lincoln, his movement and the struggles of the Union Army in the Civil War have come to represent a defense of liberal republican self-government through that period. Especially in the late 19th century, there was worry about the future prospects of these kinds of popular movements. There was a hopefulness attached to Lincoln himself, but also to the American model that the Republican party and the ideals that were fought for were maintained. For abolitionists and their allies, for reformers who made common cause with abolition, it was wonderful affirmation of taking the largest existing slave power of the time and moving towards immediate emancipation in 1865.

In other parts of the world it was a more mixed legacy, as in the United States, of course. Elites in some parts of the world struggled with the meanings of what this could lead to in terms of popular politics. You find in the workingmen's movements of this period in Great Britain, around Europe and even in other parts of the world, a kind of embrace of the Civil War as a victory for the party of liberty. Not everyone in the late 19th century was sure that they wanted to celebrate that.

There were some in the Civil War period and even thereafter who saw the American South as a civilization to be celebrated. We find that in the South today with the secession balls last December. We find in other parts of the country—and I would expect around the world now—people who continue to celebrate the Lost Cause and pick up on its meanings in very different settings: for instance, in the way that American conservatives outside the South in the late 20th century tapped on Confederate flag bumper stickers, or the ways in which country music can trade in the symbolism and metaphors of the Old South and the Lost Cause. I think you find that in sometimes very odd places in other parts of the world. With the 60th anniversary of *Gone With the Wind*, one of the most interesting studies that I came across was a kind of a Japanese cult of Margaret Mitchell and *Gone With the Wind*. It leaves you wondering just exactly what is the allure, what is the power of this cultural artifact, but also the war and the cultures that it is evoking.

OWENS: Obviously the religious schisms of the 19th century were tied into the great political schism over slavery. How did international influences play into religious perspectives on Lincoln, national unity, reconciliation or something else?

QUIGLEY: It is a great question and certainly an interesting period for American religion and for thinking about religion. Lincoln is a difficult figure for those who want to champion an internal Christian lineage in American public life, but he is equally

tricky and maybe even more challenging for those who want to make an argument for a clear break at some point from a more religious to a more secular political order.

Lincoln, throughout his career, shifts in some profound ways, certainly not in any linear way across his life, but in struggles with questions of belief and disbelief. He experienced the loss of loved ones and of children, early childhood death all around, the loss of mother, and family members in his own childhood. The presence of death and the struggle with religious belief animated not just Lincoln, but the world that he came out of in the 18th and 19th centuries.

To think about the Civil War era more generally beyond Lincoln, I think it is a critical period for the coming of a kind of entrenchment of a certain American Catholicism. Here at Boston College it is striking to think about the fact that some Jesuits in Boston thought that the middle of the Civil War was a good time to launch this kind of institution in 1863. But there are a number of Jesuit institutions and Catholic institutions that are founded in this period. John McGreevy has written quite well about the development of a certain North American Catholicism in this period. In the third quarter of the 19th century, American Catholic history was profoundly shaped by the events of this period.

Similarly, Protestantism, especially in the American South, confronted mass death and violence, and at the same time race, which remains an enduring difficulty in the modern history of the Southern Baptist movement and a challenge for Protestantism more generally. Here I'm thinking of later divides over civil rights, over states' rights. A lot of the enduring fault lines in modern America, in Protestant Christianity, can be traced back to not just the Civil War but to the Reconstruction period and to development through that era.

One of the great works of internationalizing American history is a work by Jim Campbell, who teaches out at Stanford. It is a book called *Songs of Zion* and it is a study of the AME Zion church in both the United States and South Africa through the late 19th century. It is one of the great models of how to take seriously in this case not global history, but comparative history, and suggests the ways in which African Americans, American missionaries and other Americans with ideas about bringing Christianity abroad were transformed by the experiences of the era of Civil War and Reconstruction.

OWENS: I'd like to close by asking about the trajectory of American exceptionalism as an international concept. As viewed globally and as an American understanding, one would think there would be a certain humility toward that project after this period in American history.

QUIGLEY: It is an important question and one that the best of those thinkers in this period I think are struggling with. It underlies a lot of the most powerful rhetoric in Lincoln's remarks through this era.

Beginning in 1865 at least down to 1898, if not down to the era of World War I, we find a generation of Americans who are looking overseas for models, for examples, for lessons to draw from. There is a sense that America might learn from some of the other national experiments around the 19th-century world.

There is a certain chastened quality to a number of Americans, north and south, coming out of the 1860s, that influences a series of different kinds of engagements during this period. If you want to study the modern research university, it shows up in the United States in the 1880s and 1890s at Chicago and Hopkins and Clark and Stanford. Its origins are in an American rethinking of the moral—particularly religious—founding of all the institutions of higher education. A good deal of new life and energy is brought into higher education in the process of borrowing from the German model of the research university. Of course, as we move into the 20th century, what we now know 100 years later, we all work to try and figure out how we can recapture some of that earlier kind of moral, ethical foundation for university life that was lost in that era. But I think that there was something important gained in the turn, not just for the Ph.D.'s, like you and me, but also an imagining of what we might learn from other systems of higher education.

OWENS: Thanks very much for taking the time to talk with me.