

### **“What should I read first?”**

Inspired, collected, and summarized by John Steiner. Date of revision: September 9, 2005.  
Cincinnati Civil War Round Table <[www.cincinnatiwrt.org](http://www.cincinnatiwrt.org)>

“If I know very little about the Civil War, how do I get started in learning about it?” Here are some Recommendations and Suggestions from members of the Cincinnati Civil War Roundtable about how to start learning more about the Civil War:

Methodology: CCWRT members were asked to suggest their own basic books on the Civil War for those who want a basic introduction to or overview of Civil War history, or who wanted to start their own library, so that a new student of the war might begin somewhere. There are obviously thousands of books out there, and many critical topics that you’ll discover. One doesn’t erect a finished house shazzbam, but begins with a foundation. There’s still a market for new books, as some of the best books have been published within the past decade. While many members have devoted a lifetime of personal study to this broad subject, one’s lifetime is limited, and in order for the organization to sustain itself, new members must be recruited, and learn for themselves, and rework that which wasn’t written about quite right@ before.

Many or all of these books can be found at online used book dealers such as BookFinder:

Brinkley, Alan; Current, RN; Friedel, F; and Williams, TH. *American History: A Survey*. 8<sup>th</sup> Edition, McGraw Hill, 1991.

CCWRT Comment: This is the book I keep on my desk for basic reference. The chapter on the war itself is 40 pages, an excellent overview. It is preceded by a 40-page chapter on the "impending crisis" and followed by a 30-page chapter on reconstruction.

McPherson, James M. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1988.

CCWRT Comment: The book that rekindled my interest in the war. . . , generally reputed to be the best one-volume history of the war in its total sense: political, social, diplomatic, and economic, as well as military. Bibliography, B&W photo section, maps, 904 pages.”

Roland, Charles P. *An American Iliad: The Story of the Civil War*. University of Kentucky, 1991, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, revised in 2004 by other publishers.

Comments: This concise but comprehensive history reflects a synthesis of the major writings on the war, as refined and focused through Professor Roland's own research and interpretation. This is the story of the war with the emphasis on the military action, that element which distinguishes war from all other human activities.

Wagner, Margaret E; Gallagher, GW; and Finkelman, P. (Editors). *The Library of Congress Civil War Desk Reference*. Simon and Schuster: A Grand Central Press Book: 2002.

CCWRT Comment: AThe reader can quickly develop a mental outline of the broad subjects

related to the war by referring to the Table of Contents. The major headings are Civil War Timeline, Antebellum America, Wartime Politics, Battles and Battlefields, The Armies, Weaponry, The War on the Water, Prisons and POWs, Medical Care and Medicine, The Home Front, Reconstruction and the Aftermath of the war; the CW in Literature and Arts, Studying the War; Research and Publication.

Catton, Bruce. *American Heritage Picture History of the Civil War*. Published in various editions. Approximately 630 pages, 836 pictures. A true look at the war with photographs by Matthew Brady, sketches by Winslow Homer, etc.

CCWRT Comment: Amongst the most respected historians living today, this book is by far the most recommended work for new students of the Civil War, young or old. I cannot say enough about the perfect mix of simplicity, attractiveness, and Civil War scholarship that this book offers. Once a person starts reading it, you can't seem to stop; the pictures and the Greenspan battle maps alone make you want to go to a battlefield!

Robertson, James I. Jr *The Concise Illustrated History of the Civil War*. National Historical Society. Various editions published from 1961. 128 pages.

CCWRT Comments: This general-purpose guide to the Civil War has been offered by the National Park Service since the 60's, and has been reprinted several times since then. The reason why is clear: great illustrations, simple text, rich in facts, unbiased, and very scholarly. Dr. James Robertson, as you know, ranks amongst the top Civil War historians that ever lived, along with Bruce Catton.

Hagedorn, Ann. *Beyond the River: The untold story of the heroes of the Underground Railroad*. 2002. Republished in 2004 in soft cover. Simon & Schuster.

Sharra, Michael. *The Killer Angels*. 1975.

Johnson, Paul. *A History of the American People*. Harper Collins, 1999.

CCWRT Comments: The author is a Brit, and from that distance, he discussed the issues leading up to the American Civil War, the Lincoln Douglas Debates, what followed Lincoln's election, the War and major battles, the aftermath of Lincoln's death, and the Reconstruction, and clearly delineates the unfinished issues. Part IV covers the pre-war, war and reconstruction in about 100 pages, and is one of the more insightful analyses I've read. You will probably find the entire book of use.

Engle, Stephen D. *The American Civil War: The War in the West, 1861-July 1863*.

Gallagher, Gary W. *The American Civil War: The War in the East, 1861-May 1863*.

Glatthar, Joseph T. *The American Civil War: The War in the West, 1863-1865*.

Krick, Robert K. *The American Civil War: The War in the East, 1863- 1865*.

These are part of the Osprey Essential Histories Series, with each volume about 95 pages, including bibliography and index. All have a chronology of that time period, with color maps

and many photographs. Hard bound. Botley, Oxford, Great Britain: Osprey Publishing Limited, 2001. They have also been reissued as one combined volume in paperback.

For the ultimate in a condensed history, try the History Sparknotes Series: *The Civil War: 1850-1865*. New York: Sparks Educational Publishing, 2005; and *Reconstruction: 1865-1877*. New York: Sparks Educational Publishing, 2005.

These are very brief summaries, about 40 pages in length, but contain helpful descriptions of key people and terms, a summary of events, and a synopsis of events. This series is available at Barnes & Noble, \$4.98 per volume, with volumes on several other topics in history.