Review Essay:
Conflict and Comity: The Local Community and the Civil War

W. Wayne Smith
Indiana University of Pennsylvania


In the last twenty years the writing of history has changed dramatically. The new social history ("history from the bottom up") with its emphasis on the common folk and local history has reshaped thinking about the past. By focusing on the mass of humanity rather than particular notables, social historians have offered new insights into the vagaries of human experience. We now have new perspectives about the historical roles of the family, women, children, and various ethnic groups. Colonial historians, in particular, have been creative in applying the tools of the new social history to the study of the 17th and 18th centuries.

The new social history has had less impact on our understanding of the American Civil War. In fact, in 1989, Maris Vinovskis asked "have social historians lost the Civil War?" Recent essays on enlistment, the draft, and desertion in New England towns reveal the value of social analysis for the Civil War era; but essentially Vinovskis is correct. Social historians could shift their attention to the Civil War Era and find a fruitful area in which to work.

Pennsylvania's experience during the Civil War, as I argued in an essay in 1984, offers many possibilities for historical research. We lack a cohesive study of the state during the war as well as special studies on certain cities, Pennsylvania soldiers, Governor Andrew Curtin, economic development, and race relations. For the social historian who wishes to plow the ground with more modern research tools and insights, the Keystone state offers much promise.

Two new books employ the prism of local history to explore Pennsylvania history in a new way. Grace Palladino, a labor historian now working as an
editor of the Samuel Gomper Papers, focuses on antidraft and labor tensions in the anthracite coal fields. Her book, *Another Civil War*, reveals the value of placing Civil War problems in the longer chronological context of a community's history. J. Matthew Gallman, a professor of history at Loyola College in Baltimore, for his dissertation at Brandeis University, reexamined the Philadelphia story during the Civil War. Now published as *Mastering Wartime: A Social History of Philadelphia During the Civil War*, his work represents the application of the new social history to a familiar terrain.

Palladino's book is a thoughtful and well-written essay. She demonstrates that the social disarray in the anthracite region was more complex than what historians have traditionally thought. The anthracite coal region of eastern Pennsylvania was one of the hotbeds of anti-draft, anti-war sentiment in the Union. As enrolling officers attempted to identify the eligible men available for the Militia Draft of 1862, the officers encountered stubborn resistance from coal miners and their wives. The miners frequently evaded the draft by running away to the woods or bolting their doors, but their wives acted more forcefully. The women spat on and stoned the enrolling officers, and one woman thrust her smallpox-infested child into the face of one draft officer. The following year as federal provost marshals attempted to enforce the Conscription Act of 1863 they encountered resistance in the coal mining areas again. The anti-draft violence was so disruptive that federal troops had to come into the area to restore law and order.

The traditional explanation for the difficulties in the anthracite coal regions is that the area was infested with conspirators, principally Irish Democratic miners, who wished to sabotage the Union effort. Contemporaries explained "there is a secret order here . . . avowing their determination to resist the Enrollment or Draft" (106). Historians since have underscored the conspiracy theory by arguing that the notorious Molly Maguires "cut their terrorist teeth on the draft machinery of the Civil War."³

Palladino argues that to read the difficulties in the anthracite region simply in terms of antidraft, antiwar sentiment is to miss a more important story. Her thesis, essentially, is that the antidraft sentiments expressed deeper symptoms of a class warfare between coal operators and miners. The class warfare, she contends, arose long before the war. The class conflict stemmed from the attempts of coal miners to establish themselves as co-equal to the owners of coal companies. Miners and operators battled over issues that predated and were independent of the Civil War. But the administrators of the draft construed the labor strife to be expressions of antiwar, anti-Union sentiment. Their commitment of military force to uphold the draft laws assisted the coal companies in quelling labor unrest. Federal agents became, in effect, instruments of local capitalists to maintain control over labor.
The labor strife in the coal fields stemmed from the clashing visions of republican idealism and capitalist reality. In the early republic, idealists preached the gospel of individual enterprise and free labor. They theorized that managers and workers were co-producers; their abstract theories portrayed a society of “collective harmony” where all shared in the profits and security of a productive republican society. But the utopian dreams dissipated in the antebellum years. Industrialization created a society in which competitive capitalism dominated and labor was servile. Nowhere, Palladino argues, were the realities of a capitalist order more evident than in the coal fields. There speculation and ruthless competition among coal operators, and between them and the railroad barons created a system where profits and operating costs were squeezed for every dollar possible. Among those feeling the pinch were the coal miners. Facing temporary layoffs and declining wages, the miners became victims of emerging capitalism. Rather than realizing collective harmony between co-producers, miners found themselves in a competitive struggle for survival.

Additional elements such as demagogic politics and ethnic tensions further exacerbated the cauldron of class conflict. As with all political campaigns Democrats and Republicans alike portrayed their differences in simplistic, passionate stereotypes. Democrats looked for issues to use against the Lincoln administration and interconnected economic and racial issues. They contended that the laboring class was bearing the burden of a war being fought to benefit blacks. They especially appealed to the negrophobic and class interests of Irish miners. Republicans, on the other hand, equated Democratic opposition to the Lincoln administration with treason. They interpreted antiwar and antidraft sentiment as subversion of the Union.

The draft became a central feature in this vortex of class interests and political passions. Democrats questioned its constitutionality and claimed that its features of commutation and substitution exempted the rich. Fueled by the demagogic political passions and class interests, Irish miners rebelled against the draft. Palladino has called attention to a troublesome aspect of the draft that compounded the problems, namely, that local draft officials erroneously enrolled aliens and other ineligible persons. Those practices, she claims, encouraged Irish miners to evade the draft. The system appeared to be fraught with inequality, and laborers believed they were justified in evading or subverting it.

Intensified labor activity and strife occurred concomitantly with the draft and other Civil War problems. Coal miners used the increased demand for coal as leverage to enhance their working conditions and wages. The years 1862 and 1863 were times of enormous stresses for the Union on the battlefield and in domestic politics. In the coal fields of eastern Pennsylvania, the stresses were
compounded by miners’ protests and strikes. Coal operators and local draft officials welcomed military authority into the area to quell the discordant miners. The military, while ostensibly responsible for enforcing the laws of the United States, became, in fact, an arm of exploitative capitalism.

Palladino has written a thoughtful and well-considered argument. Yet she falls prey to the faults of old fashioned labor history. She sees “good guys,” the coal miners, pitted against “bad guys,” the coal operators and the draft officials. No doubt exists as to which side she defends. Coal miners were cheated, she implies, by the forces of history as well as by the Lincoln administration. “Violence,” she argues, “was not the basis of labor organization in the coal regions” (p. 135). Palladino’s evidence for labor violence is pointedly drawn from antilabor sources, for example, the Miners’ Journal, as if to imply that labor violence was exaggerated. Yet, she seems to ignore the fact that the coal miners were also guilty of intimidation, physical abuse, and murder.

Gallman’s history offers a less dramatic story and will likely stand more as a reference tool. Unlike Palladino’s story, Gallman found no seething undercurrent of conflict. If heroes exist in Gallman’s story they are the established institutions and people who maintained order in Philadelphia and met the demands of patriotism. Gallman focused on Philadelphia during the Civil War because he believed that “that major events are a useful means of illuminating everyday life. Sometimes the best way to understand a community is to examine it under crisis” (ix). Using this premise he set out to determine how the Civil War touched Philadelphia, its institutions, and its inhabitants. His thesis is that the established institutions of Philadelphia met the challenges of wartime.

Unlike the anthracite coal regions, Philadelphia’s experiences with the Civil War draft were less troublesome. Urban areas obviously had a larger pool from which to find soldiers. Additionally, as Gallman notes, Philadelphia’s public and private institutions responded to the call for troops by raising bounty money. So successful was Philadelphia in finding and funding recruits that the city nearly avoided the draft. Philadelphia and its environs sent more soldiers to war than what the draft required for that area. The city was able to meet the call largely through lucrative bounties for enlistees. Altogether, the city paid out $10 million in Civil War bounties. These bounties, of course, represented a significant transfer of wealth. For what was it used? How did the soldier enhance his or his family’s circumstances by volunteering and receiving the bounty? Did the less wealthy become propertied as a result of this sudden income? These are questions a future historian might want to consider.

It is interesting to note the differences between urban and rural areas in regard to the draft. Philadelphia had a large pool of manpower, but obviously the anthracite regions felt a real pinch. Emily Harris found that the volunteer-
ing and draft exhausted Deerfield, Massachusetts of its available men. Similarly, I am finding in Indiana County a real concern that the war was depopulating the area of its young men. The Indiana Democrat reported in 1865 that “this county is already fearfully depleted of its working men and another call will almost take them all.” Urban areas like Philadelphia could rely more on immigrants and the unemployed to fill the rolls. Additionally, Philadelphia possessed larger financial resources to fund the call for troops. Urban areas obviously had more resources to respond to the draft than did rural areas.

Gallman is more interesting and persuasive when he focuses on less familiar topics. In his chapters on benevolent institutions he plows new ground for the social historian. Philadelphia, as a major axis on routes funneling new troops to the army and returning wounded to hospitals and their homes, gained the reputation as a soldier’s refuge. “The soldiers entertain a high regard for Philadelphia,” wrote one soldier (117). Upper class Philadelphians gave their money and time for soldiers’ kitchens and hospitals. They collected food and clothing for the soldiers in the field. The highlight of city’s benevolence came with the Great Sanitary Fair in June 1864 when Philadelphians raised over a million dollars to assist the Sanitary Commission. Gallman argues that the benevolent activities were less the expression of centralization than the emergence of localism. Philadelphia had established benevolent agencies to deal with urban problems prior to the war. Consequently, during the war the agencies could shift their resources to the care and concerns of the soldiers.

Philadelphia’s Civil War benevolence presented a sharp contrast to the city’s prewar reputation for violence. In the 1830’s and 1840’s the city experienced some particularly virulent anti-abolitionist, anti-Catholic and anti-black riots. Knowing that many Philadelphians sympathized with the South and the city had a staunch Democratic Party, one might have expected to see social disorder continue into the war. Philadelphia escaped the violence found in New York City and Pennsylvania’s anthracite region. By finding enough soldiers voluntarily the city avoided most of the tensions engendered by the draft. Still, as Gallman argues throughout the book, the established institutions successfully met the challenges of war. Gallman believes that one of the real heroes in Philadelphia was Mayor Alexander Henry. The mayor demonstrated wisdom and imagination by appealing to dissident Democrats for help in maintaining order and by personally appealing to demonstrators to desist. The mayor created a disciplined police war that maintained law and order, but avoided being abusive “street toughs.” His police force avoided the fierce ethnic battles characteristic of Baltimore in the 1850’s or New York City in the draft riots. His police force applied the tactics that twentieth century police training manuals preach—forcibly contain a situation before it becomes uncontrollable.
Henry’s policemen also had to contend with soldiers who flooded the hospitals and transportation centers in the city. This influx of transients, many of whom were unruly, provided the potential for massive social disorder. Police arrests increased dramatically during the war, but Philadelphia suffered from no great crime wave. Most of the incidents of disorder were between the soldiers and restricted to army camps. Along with provost marshals, the Civil War military police, Henry’s city police force “acted in anticipation of problems” and shielded the ordinary citizen from offensive behavior. Philadelphia thereby avoided major disruptions.

Another potentially disruptive force of the war on Philadelphia’s community was the economic changes that came with the war. As with most wars, the Civil War created more jobs but stimulated an inflationary surge. The situation facing most workers was to take advantage of the increased work and cope with the rising prices. Like the coal miners in eastern Pennsylvania, laborers in Philadelphia sought unity and strength in trade unions. The city already had in 1861 considerable labor activity. National labor leaders, notably, William Sylvis of the molders union, and strong unions like the National Typographical Union, had established a firm hand in labor negotiations. As the war and inflation progressed, the city experienced more strikes. But, unlike the circumstances in the coal regions, labor activity in Philadelphia impeded neither production nor the war effort. While the laborers criticized the draft for its apparent class bias, Philadelphia’s success in finding recruits obviated any true labor concern over losing jobs.

As a manufacturing city Philadelphia found that some industries had to transform themselves to meet the new reality. The textile manufacturers lost Southern cotton and had to turn to woolen goods; shoe companies abandoned the cheap footwear for slaves, and contracted for army boots; pitchfork makers turned not from ploughshares to swords, but from pitchforks to bayonets. Initially the wartime demand for uniforms promised a bonanza for female seamstresses. But so many inexperienced and previously unemployed women hired out as sewing women that the labor market became flooded. Unscrupulous contractors exploited the situation and women’s pay declined throughout the city. While some sympathizers urged the women to organize a labor union, the women chose the unorthodox avenue of petitioning President Lincoln for higher wages. The President ordered the quartermasters to adjust contract prices upward for uniforms and his actions brought the sewing women some relief.

The war provoked significant economic changes in Philadelphia. Without being unduly statistical in his approach and avoiding the hard mathematics of an econometrician, Gallman charts some of the changes in Philadelphia’s
economy. Prior to the war Philadelphia had established itself as a leading manufacturing and commercial center. Despite some difficult months at the outset of the war, Philadelphia’s economy bounced back. Overall, Gallman argues, the war neither strengthened nor weakened Philadelphia’s economic posture. Attempting to discern patterns on a more localized and personal basis, Gallman scoured the R.G. Dun credit reports, now housed at Harvard University, for Philadelphia businesses. While he made no major discoveries—better capitalized companies with lower debts weathered the storm, small contractors in difficulty eagerly sought government contracts, older firms fared better overall than newly-established companies—the R.G. Dun data allowed him to examine individual firms. Gallman is able to delve beneath the quantitative level and offer a more personalized view of economic life in Philadelphia. His case histories give the reader a clearer understanding of business life in Philadelphia during the war.

Gallman’s argument is well substantiated by his evidence. Philadelphians drew on their established traditions and institutions for strength and continuity during the war. Consequently, the city faced no great social or economic upheaval. Its social structure, its institutions, and its economy endured the war largely unimpaired.

Palladino’s and Gallman’s studies, in their different ways, represent excellence in local history. Well-researched and well-written, they present historical standards which subsequent local studies should follow. Through their work, we can better appreciate the varieties of the Civil War experiences. Hopefully, their books will encourage other historians to delve into local history seeking new insights our past.

Notes

5. February 16, 1865.