

Good Books about History, 2008
Reviews by members of the OLLI-GMU History Club
Compiled by Tom Hady

How the South Could have Won the Civil War: The Fatal Errors That Led to Confederate Defeat, Bevin Alexander (2007, Crown), reviewed by Bob Persell.

Although Alexander credits Lee with being an excellent tactician and battlefield commander, he faults Lee for a failed strategy. Alexander contends that the South had three choices: passive defense as advocated by Davis, active pursuit of destruction of the enemy army as advocated by Lee, and invasion of the North as advocated by Jackson. Basically, according to Alexander, the failure of the South to follow Jackson's strategy cost them the war. How the South could have successfully invaded the North without engaging the Union Army was never answered to my satisfaction. There are some excellent summaries of campaigns and Alexander poses some interesting hypotheses, but such claims as that the Seven Days campaign in which Lee drove McClellan from the gates of Richmond was a "fatal battle for the South and the "decisive turning point" against the South certainly place Alexander in a minority. I find Alexander's writing easy to read but his arguments hard to swallow.

To America, Personal Reflections of an Historian, Stephen E. Ambrose (2002, Simon & Schuster), reviewed by Tom Hady.

Completed shortly before Ambrose's death in 2002, this is a collection of short subjects, ranging from Thomas Jefferson's place in history to "The United States and Nation Building." To this reviewer, some of the most interesting chapters recounted the way his views changed over the years and over the time he studied people. For example, his first reaction when asked to write a biography of Nixon was "Oh, I can't do that. He was such a despicable person." By the time he finished, "...in volume three I found, to my astonishment, that I had developed almost a liking for him." He has favorable views also of Grant, Teddy Roosevelt and others. The writing is marred in places by a tendency to preach, rather than to tell stories--as he says is the role of historians--but it's an interesting book.

Our First Revolution: The Remarkable British Upheaval That Inspired America's Founding Fathers, Michael Barone (2007, Crown), reviewed by Bob Bohall.

The First Revolution is better known to Englishmen as the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89. The series of events resulted in the ouster of King James II and the installation of King William III and Queen Mary II and in changes to English law, governance, and politics that turned out to be major advances. The revolution was bloodless after years of religious wars and persecutions in Europe. England and the United Provinces were small Protestant outliers on the northwest fringes of a mostly Catholic continent. The book is a very readable story of the personages of the times and the emergence of constitutional monarchy. The events that led to a Protestant stadholder of the Netherlands supplanting the Catholic king of England, Scotland, and Ireland, ensured that England would take a long step forward to the kind of society we take for granted

now. The focus is on what led to the Glorious Revolution and what happened. The results were important to England, Europe and the United States in the centuries to follow, but that is the epilogue.

Barone is a conservative journalist and TV commentator. He gave a talk to OLLI during the Spring term.

Our First Revolution: The Remarkable British Upheaval That Inspired America's Founding Fathers, by Michael Barone (2007, Crown), reviewed by Gene Hayes.

Barone describes what happened to foment the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688 that put William and Mary into the English throne. He argues that the Glorious Revolution was the first American Revolution. English King Charles I wanted a Catholic government for England and he tried to ignore or get around the parliament. His son Charles II, became King after the Cromwell interlude. Barone explains the relationship of Charles II to the American colonies.

Particularly interesting was a description of the role of Randolph Churchill, Winston's ancestor, in the revolution and the selection of William and Mary as the joint monarchs. William's liberal or progressive background was pivotal to the history of England as a protestant-only monarchy, resisting Catholicism and King Louis XIV.

I liked the history because I had never heard the story. It was an eye opener because of my unfamiliarity the history from 1670 through the French and Indian War ending in 1763, and how it led to King George III and the American Revolution which Barone argues was definitely related. Barone is a conservative journalist and TV commentator. He gave a talk to OLLI at during the Spring term.

Against the Gods, The Remarkable Story of Risk, by Peter L. Bernstein (1998, Wiley), reviewed by Tom Hady.

From informal bets to formal lotteries to the stock market, men have been concerned with trying to estimate the odds of an event they want to bet on since before the time of Christ. Bernstein has written a readable history of the development of our thinking about probability. He begins with the basics, the development of our number system. Consider how much more difficult it would be to manage your retirement nest egg if you had to do it in Roman numerals! Then on to Fibonacci, Renaissance gamblers, Pascal, Bernoulli, Bayes and Gauss. Somewhere in the 1700's, the emphasis seems to have moved from the basic mathematics to applications. One chapter is devoted to Frances Galton, who had an obsession to count and measure everything. The story soon moves to economists like John Maynard Keynes and Frank Knight, and then to Harry Markowitz and modern portfolio theory. One of the latest is chaos theory: can a random shift of an electron at the edge of the Milky Way really affect the outcome of a billiard game on Earth?

Doniphan's Epic March: The 1st Missouri Volunteers in the Mexican War , by Joseph G. Dawson, III (1999, University of Kansas Press), reviewed by Bob Persell.

I never heard of this event until it was mentioned recently in one of the wonderful courses given by the National Park Service at OLLI. Intrigued, I decided to learn more. What an adventure it was! This stalwart band of about 1000 embarked on what turned out to be a march of thousands of miles across the prairies, mountains and deserts of Kansas, New Mexico, Texas and Mexico.. They fought two major battles against the Mexican army, fought off Indians, bandits and disease and returned to Missouri one year later at the end of their enlistment having lost only 10% of their starting number. It stands as a remarkable military accomplishment comparable to Xenophon's "March of the 10,000" from the time of ancient Greece. Well written, fascinating book.

A Terrible Glory – Custer and the Little Bighorn – The Last Great Battle of the American West, James Donovan (2008, Hatchette), reviewed by Dick Cheadle.

The Battle at the Little Bighorn is second only to Gettysburg as the most written-about battle in American history. I think I had read almost every work of major importance on the battle, but now comes a new book. I am 2/3rds of the way through the book and it is a terrific study of the events leading up to the battle and the battle itself. The research is outstanding, and the book goes further than any other I have read as to the allegation that Major Marcus Reno was drinking heavily during the opening attack by his battalion.

Robert Utley (who wrote Custer's biography – "*A Cavalier in Buckskin*")says about this book: "James Donovan's *A Terrible Glory* is exemplary. The research into firsthand sources is broader and deeper than I have ever seen."

The War of the World: Twentieth-century Conflict and the Descent of the West, Niall Ferguson (2006, Penguin), reviewed by George Heatley.

Ferguson is a prolific and deliberately controversial writer who presents some very interesting concepts. His major argument in the book is that Europe reached its greatest influence about 1900 and has been declining in importance and losing control over the world ever since. The 20th century was a time of material and scientific advance but also the most violent period in history, with a shift to total war. The West won militarily but lost influence in global terms to the East and South. Most interesting to me were the author's accounts of the genesis of ethnic violence in Central and Eastern Europe and in Northeast Asia.

Marianne in Chains: Daily Life in the Heart of France During the German Occupation, Robert Gildea (2002; Picador, Henry Holt), reviewed by George Heatley.

An in-depth look at how the French people lived under German occupation in a small, defined area in the Loire Valley. The author conducted meticulous research into the accommodations

people made to the occupation in order to survive. How did teenagers get together for dancing and parties in those somber days of deprivation and disorder? Similar facets of human interest are investigated to reveal the imperatives of living—work, food, shelter, transportation, family obligations—that make the people and their problems very real.

An Empire of Wealth, The Epic History of American Economic Power, John Steele Gordon (2004, Harper Perennial), reviewed by Tom Hady.

I found this paperback on the sale shelf at Powell's in Portland, but delayed reading it for a while because the title sounded like a paean of praise rather than a balanced evaluation of American economic history. It sometimes veers in that direction but neither seriously nor for long. It is a very readable and useful summary of U. S. economic history from early colonial times to 9/11. It will remain part of my library.

The Postal Age, The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America, David M. Henkin (2006, Univ. of Chicago Press), reviewed by Tom Hady.

The U. S. postal system was reformed in 1845 and 1851 to an institution used by the mass of Americans. It went from an expensive system where postage was paid by the recipient to one in which senders paid relatively small charges by affixing postage stamps. This changed the way Americans used the mail and, in turn, changed society. Henkin sets out to chronicle these changes. The reader will have to be patient and persevering to find his conclusions, though. The book is not well organized. Some things have not changed: even before the 1840's, private mail subsidized the mass-mailers, though mass mail was primarily newspapers in those days.

Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944-45, Max Hastings (2005; Vintage Books, Random House), reviewed by Philip True.

British journalist-historian Max Hastings takes September, 1944, as the starting point for his book, a time when the Western Allies believed that German forces, in full retreat, would be defeated by Christmas. He then skillfully blends the events, battles and disagreements on both the western and eastern fronts using standard documentary sources augmented by interviews of surviving veterans, diaries and unpublished accounts to present a highly readable account of the final months of the Third Reich. Those looking for detailed battle descriptions and maps should look elsewhere. Rather, the emphasis is on the strategic and tactical decisions made by the generals and the feelings and accounts of those on the ground or in the air who carried out the orders of their commanders. Hastings is not adverse to critical judgments on the major personalities involved. He admires Patton's boldness, Marshal Zukov's preparations, Eisenhower's ability to deal with the mix of personalities (though he has slight regard for Eisenhower's grasp of strategy), and is even-handed in evaluating able but unimaginative and prickly characters such as General Montgomery. This is a fine read for anyone interested in World War II.

Retribution: The Battle for Japan, 1944-45, Max Hastings (2008, Knopf), reviewed by Philip True.

Max Hastings closes the loop on his examination of the last year of World War II, and in similar fashion to his earlier book on the end of the European war, "Armageddon," covers the wide-

ranging events in the Pacific from the late summer of 1944 till the dropping of the atomic bombs in August, 1945. Although he covers the main battles on land, sea and in the air culminating in Japan's surrender, he also provides interesting chapters on lesser known events, including the retaking of Burma, the important but often overlooked role of U.S. submarines in severing the vital supply lines between Japan and its conquered territories, the situation in China where both Chinese Nationalist government forces and Mao's peasant armies, holed up in the caves of Shensi Province, are more intent on the battle to come between themselves than fighting the Japanese, and the brief Soviet campaign at war's end against Japanese forces in Manchuria. Again, as in his earlier books, Hastings has sharp observations about the participants. MacArthur had not a staff but a "court" of admirers and was driven above all to retake the Philippines and remove the smirch on his conduct early in the war; Admiral King was more concerned with long-term interests of the Navy than with tactics. So too was General Hap Arnold, focused on creating a separate Air Force service after the war. The Japanese lacked coordination of their military services and had no overall civilian-military planning structure for a lengthy war. Hastings does, however, admire a few, including Admiral Chester Nimitz and General Slim, the British commander who retook Burma. Although Hastings is critical of some aspects of the air war against Japan, he concludes that it and the dropping of the atomic bombs was necessary to finally convince Japan's leaders to surrender. The account is enriched by numerous references, diaries and other personal sources, as well as interviews with those veterans from all sides who fought in this savage war.

God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything, Christopher Hitchens (2007, Twelve - Hachette), reviewed by Bob Bohall.

From a historical or philosophical perspective the question is “Did God Make Man” or “Did Man Make God”. The British seem to do a nice job in tackling these questions and Hitchens very effectively makes his case. He addresses what he feels are the malignant forces of religion in the world and argues for a more secular approach to life based on science and reason. He draws upon history and a close and learned reading of the major religious texts to make his case. Chapter titles like “Religion Kills”, “Health to Which Religion Can Be Hazardous”, “False Metaphysical Claims”, “The Nightmare of the Old Testament”, “Tawdriness of the Miraculous”, “Is Religion Child Abuse?” and other topics effectively raise questions about practices, rituals, and the motivations of religious leaders over the centuries and the controversies between fundamentalist versus liberal theology with agnostic and atheistic beliefs that continue today. He comments on whether religion has any context with respect to morality, tolerance, the question of prayer having any benefit and is religion a positive force in our world. The book is interesting, readable, well-done, challenging and it will make you think. You may not always agree with Hitchens and he picks and chooses to make his case but it comes across as a worthwhile read.

What Hath God Wrought, The Transformation of America, 1815-1848, Daniel Walker Howe (2007, Oxford), reviewed by Tom Hady.

I was attracted to this book first by the fact that I had enjoyed its companion in the Oxford History of the United States series, David Kennedy's *Freedom from Fear*, and second because I'd just finished a class at OLLI that covered the same period. I was not disappointed. Howe provides a quite detailed and insightful history in his 855 pages (plus notes). He is especially strong on the

cultural and political history. Howe is not a fan of Andrew Jackson. As with most general historians, don't go here for good descriptions of issues like the causes of the Panic of 1837.

Post War: a History of Europe since 1945, Tony Judt (2005, Penguin). Reviewed by George Heatley.

This 800-plus-page review of European history since the end of WWII is definitely not a page-turner that you can't put down. I use it for sleep-inducing bed time reading and still have more than half of the book to go. It is well written, exhaustively researched and brings the reader up to date on the latest views and opinions about Europe during the last half-century.

Isaac's Storm: a man, a time, and the deadliest hurricane in history, by Erik Larson (1999, Crown), reviewed by Helen Anderson.

I found this book to be fascinating. I think Erik Larson is an excellent researcher. This was not the first book of his I'd read, but the other, *Devil in the White City*, is terrific, so when this was suggested to me I was curious. It is the story of the 1900 hurricane that devastated Galveston. One might not think it was the kind of thing to read for fun but it is extremely well written. If you have been to the Galveston area you will appreciate it even more.

Larson makes the story very personal. He paints a picture of Isaac Cline, Chief Meteorologist in Galveston, and his ambition as a young man. His portrayals of the lives of families of the time, and the tension and competition between the personalities in the office ring true. Cline's great curiosity is apparent as he documents his moves through the then-emerging world of following and predicting storms. Many who had faced earlier horrific storms did not live to tell the tale. Cline left enough from which this book could be drawn to give the reader a picture of what life in Galveston was like at the turn of the century before and after the storm. This is a very readable account of a storm.

The Armada, Garrett Mattingly (1959, Houghton Mifflin), reviewed by Tom Hady.

I suspect like most Americans of my generation, my schooling in European history was deficient. I've done a lot of reading since, but in general I don't do wars, so my view of the Armada still was not much better than "Drake and his buddies went out and blew the Spanish King's fleet out of the water in a big battle." This book showed me how inadequate that picture was.

The Lees of Virginia, Paul Nagel (1990, Oxford), reviewed by Tom Hady.

I have an unknown donor to the OLLI book shelf to thank for this book. Reading it was rewarding; I now know much more than before about the history of the Lee family in Virginia, from Richard, the Founder, through Robert E., the general. While the book really told me more than I wanted to know about the Lees, Civil War and Virginia history buffs will enjoy it, and I will appreciate the family's contributions and foibles to a depth I didn't before.

Suite Francaise, a novel, Irene Nemirovsky, translated by Sandra Smith (2007, Vintage).
reviewed by Gerald Holmes.

The paperback is a must read for anyone trying to understand current French history. It is an accurate description of the moral and physical collapse of France in 1940, an experience I believe the French have not yet come to terms with. While only fragmentary, the novel furnishes a view from the inside of the disintegration of society and its attempts to adjust to the occupation and to come to terms with the Vichy regime.

Tales from a Tin Can: The USS Dale, Michael Keith Olson (2007, Zenith Press), reviewed by Bob Persell.

A fascinating story that follows a ship and its crew throughout WWII in the Pacific as they fight continuously from Pearl Harbor until the end of the war. Dale was present at Pearl Harbor on December 7th and participated with carrier groups and replenishment groups in the South Pacific from Borneo to Guadalcanal and New Guinea to the Gilbert Islands, the Marshall Islands, to the Philippines, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa as well as the Aleutians. She fought kamikazes, submarines, torpedo and dive bombers, enemy cruisers, destroyers, and typhoons, and conducted shore bombardment. In short, she did everything one could ask of a destroyer. The author, son of one of Dale's crew members, gathered stories at ship reunions and interspersed these 44 first-hand accounts skillfully with author's notes that place them within the context of the war. This is definitely not a boring, pedantic work. It is alive, humorous, and makes me proud to have been a Tin Can Sailor.

China Marches West: the Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia by Peter C. Perdue (2005; Belknap, Harvard), reviewed by George Heatley.

This is a landmark study of Qing efforts to pacify and occupy present day Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet that have reverberations in today's news. The geographic area covered in the book was largely unknown to Westerners at the time and still is to readers today. A reader somewhat conversant with the names of the tribal kingdoms of the area still must have maps at his elbow to make sense of the text. Without some prior knowledge of Chinese history--for example, knowing that Qing is the reign name selected by the Manchu's after their invasion and occupation of China lasting from 1644 to 1911-- the author's account would be very difficult to follow.

After the Manchus had succeeded in conquering China, the new government of China turned its military power toward the Northwest of present-day China to consolidate its victory and protect its locus of power in the inner Asian frontiers. Under the Kangsi and Qianlong emperors, China reached its largest geographic area in history. Expanding the borders of traditional China created conflicts that we still see today.

We in the West usually look upon the decline of China in the 19th century as a footnote attesting to the global dominance of Western naval strength. However, it is useful to remember that probably the major danger in the eyes of the Qing government, going back to the 17th century, was in the western interior from where Qing control of China emanated and where its ultimate destiny was

established. By the end of the 19th century, after 250 years in power, the Qing were fighting multiple wars on different fronts at the same time: in the interior, and with various western naval powers and Japan. All these wars were just too much for the governing structure to sustain.

This important period of modern Chinese history has heretofore largely been out of reach. In what I believe is the first ever comprehensive English language account of the Qing in Northwest China, Perdue has performed a real service to the understanding of modern Chinese history with his intensive research into Chinese sources.

The Discovery of France: a Historical Geography from the Revolution to the First World War, Graham Robb (2007, Norton), reviewed by George Heatley.

When the revolutionaries overthrew the King of France, they found themselves with the task of creating a nation where one had never existed before. The French language was only spoken by a few of the new citizens who were divided into ancient ethnic groups existing from before Christian times with their own unique languages and cultures. The author follows the fascinating story of how the French sent explorers out to study the French countryside, describe the natives, and map the land and communications lines. Modern Parisians still, when asked “what is your country”, are likely to give their families’ traditional ethnic home area in response. Even today, it is possible, as I did last year, to visit old medieval towns in the mountains that had no road communications with the rest of the country until the early 20th century. Since the watershed in politics that has seen growing interest in the relevance of ethnic history, the visitor can occasionally come across writings in the old non-French languages, especially in Provence and the Languedoc, where anti-government graffiti can be in the local language. The most fascinating descriptions in the book are the accounts of different, exotic customs that existed in various parts of modern day France.

A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam, Neil Sheehan (1988; Vintage, Random House), reviewed by Kevin Deasy.

Sheehan was a war correspondent with extensive exposure to actual field conditions on the ground during the Vietnam War. His exhaustive study of America’s involvement in that war reflects that personal experience, but also draws on Vietnamese and American history, interviews with key U.S., South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese officials, and a large trove of documents listed in a twelve-page bibliography. This 790 page book was painstakingly pieced together over a sixteen-year period. The book’s perspective mirrors that of the late John Paul Vann, a much-larger-than-life--but deeply flawed--character who played a pivotal role in both the buildup and draw-down of American forces in Vietnam.

The book offers many insights that may surprise American veterans of that conflict, and might have given U.S. decision-makers pause had they been understood at the inception of our involvement in that benighted land. For example, the South Vietnamese soldiers who looked so pathetically incompetent in newspaper photos with out-sized American helmets and weapons were actually heirs to a strong martial tradition dating back centuries. The North Vietnamese were likewise heirs to that tradition. Remember the Mongol hordes that overran much of Asia? The

Vietnamese beat them. . . twice! And the country we knew as South Vietnam was originally Cambodian territory that was long ago conquered by warlike Vietnamese pushing southward. The Vietnamese also defeated Chinese invaders on multiple occasions--most notably in 1789, when Nguyen Hue (later to become Emperor Quang Trung) defeated Manchu forces in a surprise attack by violating the Tet Holiday. So the “unprecedented”, countrywide Tet Offensive of 1968 was actually just the second Tet Offensive in Vietnamese history.

More recently, Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem (whom the U.S. installed as head of the Saigon Government) were both aristocratic sons of Vietnamese Mandarin families that had fallen out of favor with the Imperial Court. Though well brought up and educated, their aspirations to high office were frustrated by outsider status at Court and the onset of WW-II. So each of them went his own way, with tragic consequences that are all too well known today. Sheehan’s book clearly chronicles the spectacle of American hubris and military victories against a backdrop of South Vietnamese government corruption and incompetence, all leading to inglorious American withdrawal and South Vietnamese defeat in the end.

Return to Dragon Mountain: Memories of a Late Ming Man, Jonathan D. Spence (2007, Viking), reviewed by George Heatley.

Zhang Dai, a 49 year old senior civil servant in the government of the Ming Empire, lost everything in the fighting and disruptions of the Manchu (Qing) invasion of China in 1644. He had tried to rally the Chinese forces in his area against the invaders but without success. Forced to flee his mansion in Hangzhou with its antiques, paintings, and library of historical and philosophical writings, he went to the countryside where he and his family managed a bare living by subsistence farming. When not farming, he devoted his time to compiling a memoir celebrating the fading world of sophistication and hugely successful human achievement that typified the late Ming Empire.

Jonathan Spence is the most prolific expert in Chinese history writing today. He has many history books to his credit and has utilized the texts written by Chinese scholars and historians to create captivating pictures of olden times in China.

The Summer of 1787: the Men Who Invented the Constitution, David O. Stewart (2007, Simon & Schuster), reviewed by Bennet Gold.

The successful creation of the Constitution is a suspense story. The Summer of 1787 takes us into the sweltering room in which delegates struggled for four months to produce the flawed but enduring document that would define the nation - then and now. Briskly written, full of deft characterizations and drama, grounded firmly in the records of the Constitutional Convention and its members' letters, this is a splendid rendering of the document's creation. All the debates are here, as are all the convention's personalities.

Becoming Charlemagne; Europe, Baghdad and the Empires of A.D. 800, Jeff Sypeck (2006, HarperCollins) reviewed by Tom Hady.

Sypeck is an interesting lecturer (he was at OLLI last fall) and writer, and this book was easy to read. I finished it with the feeling that I now knew “Karl,” as he calls Charlemagne, somewhat better, but that there was still a lot more to know.

Everyday Life of the Barbarians; Goths, Franks and Vandals, Malcolm Todd (1972, Dorset) reviewed by Tom Hady.

The tribes living north of Rome are commonly dismissed as barbarians, but what were they really like? That’s the question Todd, Professor of Archeology at Exeter, sets out to illuminate in this slim (174 pages) volume. If you want to know more about central Europe of Roman times, this is a good place to start. Caesar, it turns out, probably was not an accurate source.

The General & the Jaguar: Pershing’s Hunt for Pancho Villa, Eileen Welcome. (2006, Little, Brown & Co.), reviewed by Bob Persell.

On March 9, 1916 Pancho Villa and several hundred of his army attacked the small border town of Columbus, New Mexico and set in motion a punitive expedition by US troops led by General Pershing. Mexico, at this time, was wracked by internal rebellion. The central government, led by President Carranza, was challenged by several strongmen of whom Villa was one of the most prominent and colorful. Early in his efforts he was viewed positively by Americans and the feeling was reciprocal. However, US policy was seeking stability in Mexico and allowed Carranza’s forces to traverse US territory and defeat Villa in battle. From that time on Villa developed an intense hatred for gringos which led to his decision to attack Columbus. Pershing’s expedition, consisting of cavalry, trucks, tanks, and airplanes, pursued Villa unsuccessfully for eleven months. Originally done with the permission of the Mexican government and at least the acquiescence of most citizens, the expedition soon came under attack by government forces as well as guerrillas. While the parallels are not exact, of course, there are similarities to Iraq. The author, a Pulitzer prize winner, writes in a clear, lively style. Her description of the execution of some of the prisoners convicted of murder is graphic, perhaps too much so. A great story of a little known episode of our history.