

***Good Books about History, 2009***  
***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 Books) reviewed by Bob Persell

This is a well written, thoroughly engaging and enjoyable account of the Civil War. Alexander lays out the contending and conflicting strategies of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Davis believed in fighting a defensive war, protecting all the South's territory; Lee wished to attack the Union armies and defeat them decisively; Jackson was characterized as favoring attacking the railroads and industry of the North. How Jackson was to accomplish this without engaging the Union armies is not explained.

While criticizing Lee's strategic vision, Alexander praises Lee's battlefield skill: "Lee and Jackson demonstrated inspired leadership and brilliant field command." At one point Alexander goes way too far out on a limb when he describes Lee's Seven Days Campaign. Lee drove McClellan's army from the gates of Richmond. Alexander calls that a fatal turning point for the South. This is certainly an audacious claim, and one in which I have seen no other historian make.

In many of his criticisms of Lee, I think that Alexander does not give enough consideration to the fact that Lee, the general, was subordinate to Davis, the president. Lee's great victories are dismissed as not great enough; his defeats are said to be because he didn't follow Jackson's precepts.

Alexander writes well. The campaigns are clearly and succinctly described; there are some errors of fact and some statements cry for sourcing. But my major criticism is not with facts, but with the conclusions and speculations. Alexander ends on a high note when he says "more than any other American he (Lee) made it possible for North and South to come back together to create the greatest and most prosperous nation in history."

A good, stimulating book; read it.

***Mysteries of the Middle Ages and the Beginning of the Modern World***, Thomas Cahill (2006, Random House) reviewed by Tom Hady

Cahill tells the story of seven locations, separated by time and place, from Rome in the early part of the Christian era to 14<sup>th</sup> C. Ravenna. In the process, he throws his light onto some interesting characters of the history—Jesus of Nazareth, Hildegard, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Francis of Assisi, Heloise and Abelard, Thomas Aquinas, Giotto and others. He explores the development of ideas, and their development in sites like Paris and Oxford. I found the book much more interesting than his *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, which I thought did not live up to its title.

***The Last Knight. The Twilight of the Middle Ages and the Birth of the Modern Era***, Norman F. Cantor (2004, Harper Perennial) reviewed by Tom Hady

“England in the middle of the fourteenth century,” says Cantor, “was a boisterous, violent and crime-ridden place. Radical fluctuations in the land market and the supply of labor exacerbated an already class-polarized, disease-ridden society. Demobilized mercenaries from the wars in France roamed the English countryside in organized gangs—this was the grim social reality behind the Robin Hood legend developing at this time.”

John of Gaunt was the second son of Edward III and, according to Cantor, the richest man in Western Europe who was not a crowned head. He lived from 1340 to 1399, a period when medieval times were drawing to a close and the Renaissance was beginning. Gaunt was trained by his brother Edward (the Black Prince) in the art of war, and succeeded Edward (though not as successfully) when Edward was felled by malaria acquired on campaign in Spain. He was heavily involved in government and business at home, according to the blurb “a multibillionaire with a brand name equal to Rockefeller.” That provides Cantor with a framework to describe English society of the period. He fulfills that task in a very readable and interesting book.

***The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl***, Timothy Egan (2006, Houghton Mifflin). Reviewed by Bob Bohall

This is a well-written history of a period of time and a part of the country that I knew little about but had only heard. A National Book Award finalist, the history tells the epic story of an environmental disaster and its impact on people and communities stricken with fear and choked by dust in the “dirty thirties.” The storms that impacted the High Plains in the darkest years of the depression were like nothing ever seen before. Environmental arrogance and hubris, political chicanery and poor policies and a ruinous ignorance of nature’s ways devastated the land and the people. This interesting book is available in both hardback and paper. My paperback was 311 pages. I read it in small doses. The whole book at once would be a “depression,” but it is also a story of tough and stoic human endurance. Well done and interesting.

***American Creation, Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic***, Joseph J. Ellis (2007, Random House) reviewed by Tom Hady

Our founding fathers were politicians, and very skilled ones at that! Not exactly the story as we learned it in grade school history, but the message comes through loudly and clearly as Ellis tells the stories of events in the early years of our republic. In context, Washington’s winter at Valley Forge, Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase, Madison’s campaign to get Washington out of retirement to chair the Constitutional Convention and others come alive.

Ellis writes interesting stories. They served to keep me entertained through a transatlantic flight and several nights in the hotel and added to my knowledge.

***The Ascent of Money, A Financial History of the World***, Niall Ferguson (2008, Penguin) reviewed by Tom Hady

As the title suggests, Ferguson (a history professor at Harvard) begins with the hunter-gatherer, who has little use for money, and progresses through societies that have more need of it and invented and embellished it. He covers that history rapidly, though. By page 40, we have a picture of a modern Glasgow loan shark being led away by the police.

The bulk of the book is devoted to events of the last few decades, culminating in the beginnings of our current debacle. It is a useful review of “what happened?” I found it less useful in understanding why it happened.

***Champlain's Dream, The European Founding of North America***, by David Hackett Fischer, (2008, Simon & Schuster) reviewed by Gerald P. Holmes

This is an impressive scholarly work, the product of thorough research. It covers not only the early French explorations of North America but details Champlain's birth and early life and the his later battles at the French court to realize his ambitions for a French North American empire. There are detailed footnotes and a bibliography at the end of the book, and maps and illustrations both historical and contemporary throughout. . While this book is a major academic achievement, it is written in an easy to read style. (The author won a Pulitzer for his earlier *Washington's Crossing*). Champlain is shown as basically a renaissance man and is the focus of this study, but you also learn a lot about French and early American history.

***West Point Blue and Gray: West Point Made Them Friends; the Civil War Made Them Enemies***, Thomas Fleming (2006, First Books) reviewed by Bob Persell

This little book, 165 pages, was a sheer delight, filled with delightful anecdotes about the relations between classmates as they approached the Civil War and later during and after the war. For example, Custer, after the Battle of Williamsburg found his rebel classmate, John Lea, lying wounded in a barn. Custer arranged to have him placed safely in a home in Williamsburg. Lea fell in love with a local girl and became engaged. Although the Union army was withdrawing from the peninsula, Custer was able to obtain leave and attend the wedding. The book is filled with such stories that attest to the enduring nature of many friendships forged by these warriors during their cadet days.

***Cathedral, Forge, and Waterwheel. Technology and Invention in the Middle Ages***, Frances and Joseph Gies (1994, Harper Collins) reviewed by Tom Hady

Were the Dark Ages really so dark? The Gies argue, synthesizing the work of many scholars, that they were really quite a fertile period for innovation, building a good foundation for the Renaissance to follow. In the “Not So Dark Ages,” 500-900, they cite the spread of the heavy plow, which had reached the Rhine Valley by the early eighth century, and the padded horse collar, which arrived a century or so later and at least tripled the weight a horse could pull, compared to the old throat-and-girth harness. They discuss advances in waterpower, shipping,

printing and warfare, among others. Leonardo's notebooks come into their story, notebooks that they say (quoting Ivor Hart) were "[the] fevered and disordered activity of a lifetime—notes that teemed with scientific discussions based on observations and experiments; notes that swept thorough a wide range of problems in art, science, philosophy and engineering." As do most modern authors, they lay to rest the notion that the medievals thought the world was flat. A most interesting story.

***A Voyage Long and Strange, Rediscovering the New World***, Tony Horwitz (2008, Henry Holt) reviewed by Dick Cheadle

This book is a rare combination of brilliant historical research and incredible humor. In it, the author first describes historical explorations of early North America and the West Indies, then follows up with a chapter on his own re-tracings of these explorations and all the mis-adventures inherent therein. It reads fast and easy and some of the passages are funny beyond belief.

***Westward to Vinland, The Discovery of Pre-Columbian Norse House-sites in North America***, Helge Ingstad (1969, St. Martin's) reviewed by Tom Hady

Ingstad was the discoverer of the Norse site at L'Anse aux Meadows in northern Newfoundland, which most believe was of Viking origin. Was it Leif's Vinland? When I visited there, the Canadian government was being careful not to say yea or nay. Ingstad (who died in 2001) also had a scholar's caution, but clearly thought so, and that it was very likely to have been *Leifsbudir*, Leif's settlement told in the Icelandic Sagas. He draws many parallels between what was found at L'Anse aux Meadows and the descriptions in the Sagas.

The book is part history, part popular archeological report (Ingstad makes frequent references to his plan to write an academic archeological report), and part travel story. It is all fascinating reading for one who is interested in Norse history.

***The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic—and How it Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World***, Steven Johnson (2006, Penguin). reviewed by Bob Bohall

I am not sure how I stumbled on this one but it looked interesting from visiting London a few years ago. The back cover grabbed me: It's the summer of 1854, and London is seized by a violent outbreak of cholera in the Soho District that no one knows how to stop. As the epidemic spreads, a maverick physician, Dr. John Snow, who maps the outbreak, and a local curate, Rev. Henry Whitehead, who knows the local community, are spurred to action, and work to solve the most pressing medical riddle of their time. They find the source at the local public water pump. Author Johnson illuminates the intertwined histories of the spread of disease, the rise of cities and the nature of scientific inquiry, offering both a thrilling account of the most intense cholera outbreak to strike Victorian London and a powerful explanation of how it has shaped the world we live in. The very readable 262-page history was a *New York Times* notable book of the year. With the exception of the epilogue which is a bit preachy, the book is a well-done and interesting history. It also provides a good rationale for drinking beer.

***Europe in the High Middle Ages***, William Chester Jordan (2001, Penguin) reviewed by Tom Hady

An excellent and very readable overview of Europe in the eleventh through the fourteen centuries. Unlike some books of the type, Jordan recognizes the existence of countries beyond Britain, France, Germany and Italy, and provides at least cursory coverage of their history. I particularly appreciated his emphasis on the social and political history of the period.

***The CRUSADER, Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism***, Paul Kengor (2006, Harper Collins) reviewed by Norbert Michaud

What is unique about this book is the use of declassified information in the form the NSDDs (National Security Decision Directives). Even though we at Defense Intelligence Agency had briefed Reagan about the deteriorating conditions in the Soviet Union by April of 1982, as the book mentions, we were not aware that Reagan had, from the outset of his presidency in 1981, intended to bring the Soviet Union to its knees economically. That mission is clearly laid out in the NSDDs which were not only classified but had little distribution among the powers that be (Congress). That explains why he was so intent on pushing for Strategic Defense Initiative: the Soviets would have to spend a lot of their resources to overwhelm such a system. It also explains why Secretary of Defense Weinberger was so anxious for us to brief Reagan on the economic problems the military industries were having as early as 1981-82 (also highly classified); a briefing mentioned in passing in Reagan's diary.

***Austerity Britain, 1945-51***, David Kynaston. (2007, Bloomsbury) reviewed by James Hubbard.

Kynaston surveys British history from the end of the Second World War until 1951. He includes political history as well as consideration of ordinary life. He makes wide use of contemporary testimony, particularly reports from Mass Observation (a British social research organization of the period). Anyone interested in British life or political or social issues (such as housing and redevelopment) will enjoy this work.

***Duel of Eagles, the Mexican and U.S. Fight for the Alamo***, Jeff Long (1990, Morrow) reviewed by Dick Cheadle

I would call this book THE definitive study of the Battle of the Alamo to include the events leading up to the battle and the aftermath, to include the Battle of San Jacinto. "Jeff Long has done a thorough job. I doubt if anyone will do it better." (Evan S. Connell, author of *Son of the Morning Star*).

***Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief***, James M. McPherson (2008, Penguin) reviewed by Bob Persell

This nifty little book (270 pages before you hit acknowledgments, notes, etc.), written by perhaps the premier American Civil War historian, focuses entirely on Lincoln's role as commander in

chief. It is clear that McPherson is unabashedly a Lincoln admirer. Well written, his points brilliantly argued and well documented, the book is thoroughly enjoyable. There are no new facts, but the facts are woven together in such a manner as to make clear that Lincoln evolved into an extremely effective commander in chief who mastered the art of balancing the military and political complexities that are an inherent part of any war. Highly recommended.

***The Sea Kingdoms. The History of Celtic Britain & Ireland***, Alistair Moffat (2008, Birlinn) reviewed by Tom Hady

Moffat says his purpose is to provide “an extended definition of what ‘Celtic’ might usefully mean to anyone who wants to think about Britain and Ireland in a more expansive way.” I guess he succeeds, though it’s not a “definition” in the sense we are looking for when we consult a dictionary.

The “Sea Kingdoms” are those along the Irish Sea; Cornwall, Wales, Scotland and its Isles, Man, and Ireland. Moffat provides an interesting, if rather idiosyncratic, description of events in those areas, particularly as they affected the Celtic population. After reading *The Sea Kingdoms*, I know a lot more about the history of those areas than I did, but Moffat didn’t provide me with a very good systematic framework on which to hang that knowledge. I hope what I learned was accurate—he also does not provide sources other than a five page bibliography.

***A Dawn like Thunder : the True Story of Torpedo Squadron Eight***, Robert J. Mrazek (2008, Little Brown) Reviewed by Ben Gold

Novelist and former U.S. congressman Mrazek brilliantly captures the bravery of Squadron Eight in World War II's pivotal battle of Midway and the unit's subsequent involvement at Guadalcanal. Presented in logbook format, the author's clipped narrative offers fascinating vignettes of the aviators' prewar lives. At Midway the squadron, in obsolete torpedo bombers without fighter protection, was ordered to attack Japanese carriers and was nearly totally destroyed. But six more modern Avengers flew from Midway itself, and the survivors from those Avengers formed the nucleus of a new Avenger squadron that went on to fly off the carrier Saratoga until it was damaged by a submarine attack, and then from Henderson Field on Guadalcanal in the climactic stages of the campaign for the island.

It really is a great read.

***The Way of the Ship. America’s Maritime History Reenvisioned, 1600-2000***, Alex Roland, W. Jeffrey Bolster and Alexander Keysar (2008, Wiley) reviewed by Tom Hady

This history concentrates almost entirely on civilian shipping and it traces its expansions and contractions, its successes and its failures, through our history. Whereas the stylized fact one always hears about our present merchant fleet is the race to foreign flags, these authors point out that is only true of the “blue water” trade—oceanic shipping. Domestic U.S. trade, protected by “cabotage laws,” is very large and mostly U.S.-flagged and crewed. Further, if you consider who

actually owns the ships, “It is estimated that American investors ‘own’ three times as many ships in total as are actually registered in the country.” [p. 416] That ranks us fifth in the world.

The authors are all history professors and the book is well documented. It’s also fairly easy to read.

***The Great Inflation and Its Aftermath, The Past and Future of American Affluence***, Robert Samuelson (2008, Random House) reviewed by Tom Hady

Samuelson brings us a very useful history of the economic policies of the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and especially of the inflation that marked that period. I read it with special interest since that period also spans my professional career as an economist.

I think Samuelson correctly captures the confidence of economists in the 1960's that we knew how to maintain full employment with reasonable price stability. And I well remember an American Economic Assn. meeting in the mid-1970's, when it was apparent that prevailing theory could not account for the “stagflation” of the time, and the profession was in disarray. I think Samuelson implies too large an importance to the economists and their ideas in promoting the American commitment to full employment in the postwar period, though. While the economics of the time provided the tools, it has seemed to me that our collective memory of the Great Depression drove the macroeconomic policy of the next 40 to 50 years, and the lack of elected statesmen willing to tell people they could not have government services without paying taxes had a great deal to do with the inflation. Samuelson accurately describes the inept efforts of several administrations to combat inflation through price control. I think he is correct in crediting Chairman Volcker with breaking our inflation, and President Reagan with giving Volcker the political cover he had to have to do it. The last quarter of the book discusses the period after the 1980's. I found it less insightful.

***Never Had It So Good; A History of Britain From Suez to the Beatles***, Dominic Sandbrook (2005, Abacus) reviewed by James Hubbard.

Sandbrook attempts to write a comprehensive history of British life from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. He is very good on political history, but perhaps better on popular culture and life – the origins of British popular music and the like. This is a very readable book. Well worth the effort.

***How the States Got Their Shapes***, Mark Stein (2008, Smithsonian Books) reviewed by Tom Hady

When I first saw this book, I did what most people do. I looked up my home state, Minnesota. The entry exemplified both the strengths and the weaknesses of Stein’s book. It summarizes where all the borders of the state came from. But it has a rather abbreviated account of the most interesting border, the north, and the origin of the “northwest angle.” There’s an inherent problem in this type of book. Every border affects at least two states, so you have to repeat a lot. Stein evidently felt that did not leave space to give a full account of the more complicated (and

more interesting, I think) border decisions. Unless you teach US geography, I think there are more interesting ways to spend your budget for books. This one's available in the Fairfax County library.

***Empire of Blue Water***, Stephan Talty (2007, Crown Books) reviewed by Bob Persell

What young boy, even of OLLI age, hasn't been fascinated by pirates. This book is a gem. Written by a journalist, it is an easy read about the conflict between imperial Spain to protect its treasures and England's Henry Morgan who fought to take those treasures away. Highlights of the book were the sacking of Panama by Morgan and the apocalyptic destruction of the pirate stronghold in Port Royal, Jamaica, in 1692 by a massive earthquake, four years after Morgan's death. In particular, I think Talty's description of that earthquake is exceptional. A very exciting end to a very fascinating book.

***Barbarians to Angels: The Dark Ages Reconsidered***, Peter S. Wells (2008, Norton).  
Reviewed by Bob Bohall

I was attracted to the theme: The Dark Ages were not so dark after all, according to recent archaeological discoveries. Our images of the four centuries after the fall of Rome is one of peasants and artisans of Europe barely holding on through years of random violence by lawless marauders, mass migration, disease, starvation and chaos. Wells makes the case that by the late eighth century and the reign of Charlemagne major progress occurred during the so called dark period (that was short on written history). New heights of artistry, technology, architecture, craft production, commerce and learning emerged, as did the roots of the great cities of medieval Europe. Wells is a well-qualified professor at the University of Minnesota. Unfortunately, his 240-page book is not easy to read and somehow just not that interesting. OLLI historians of the period and this theme may wish to explore other options on the Dark Ages, but part of it may just be my reaction.

***On the Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice that Remade a Nation***, Robert Whitaker (2008, Crown). Reviewed by Bob Bohall

An excellent slice of history, law and civil rights. On September 30, 1919, a group of Black sharecroppers gathered at the Hoop Spur Church near Elaine, AR. to air their grievances over payments for their cotton and seek remedies. When White deputies showed up, gunfire erupted and riots began. Over the course of several days, posses and federal troops gunned down well over 100 black sharecroppers. White authorities arrested over 300 black farmers, all-white juries sentenced 12 union leaders to death. Scipio Africanus Jones, born a slave but now a prominent attorney in the area, joined forces with the NAACP to mount an appeal in which he argued that his clients' constitutional rights to a fair trial had been violated. Never before had the U.S. Supreme Court set aside a criminal verdict in a state court. Award-winning author Whitaker's book commemorates a legal struggle, *Moore v. Dempsey*, that paved the way for the later remaking of our civil rights and our country. The book is a very readable and well researched 329-page history that is far better than fiction. Jones' tenacity and perseverance under overwhelming odds is a story in itself.



*London in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Jerry White (2007, Vintage) reviewed by James Hubbard.

White covers nineteenth century London under five headings: the City, People, Work, Culture, and Law and Order. The “City” section deals with the physical growth of London. The “People” section looks at immigration and social groups. “Work” deals with London’s industries, particularly banks and newspapers. “Culture” talks about private and public entertainments. “Law and Order” considers government and other efforts to bring order to the world’s largest city.

*Microcosm, E. coli and the New Science of Life*, Carl Zimmer (2008, Pantheon) reviewed by Oscar Hayes

I enjoyed this book because it explained the role played by Escherichia Coli bacteria in the biology revolution during the last one hundred years. The author is a science writer-journalist rather than a technician. His book is highly readable. Based on his book, I can say that E. coli studies by many researchers have been the major factor in scientific learning about how genes work, how life evolves and the DNA revolution. He explains microbiology and much about the genetic basis of disease and provides a basic understanding of how current and future genetic engineering works.