

# Analysis of look away by william c. davis

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Book Review on “ Look Away” by Willliam C. Davis. The book en d “ Look Away” by historian William C. Davis suggests in its sub that it is going to be “ A history of the Confederate States of America” and indeed it is a long book which retells the story of that short but significant episode in American history. From the beginning it is clear that this book is told from the perspective of the Confederate States, and many of the primary sources that are cited were written by leading figures from the Southern states. The author makes it clear in the preface (pp. ix-xi) that his concern as an author is not to recount in detail the battles that were fought, because this detail has already been covered by other specialist military historians, but to examine all the other aspects of life in the Confederate States at that time. In this sense it is a social history, and it homes in on the everyday lives of the ordinary citizens as well as the momentous events that were being decided on the battlefield and in government buildings. The book shows the connections of political and military events with the people, and the consequences that were played out in people’s lives.

A key concept in the book is the political structure of oligarchy which describes the patriarchal government style of Southern towns and regions and the way this contrasts with the more formal democratic processes of the North. The issue of slavery is described as an aspect of this view of society, in which there is a hierarchy of power. Those at the bottom, including women, children and slaves, are owned, traded and set to work by a ruling class of white men, whose job it is to keep order and create wealth and security for all. Davis describes the differences of opinion that were at large in the south, and argues that in fact it is the conflict with the North that solidified the Southern States into a unified position on slavery. Without this

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conflict there may well have been much more in the way of internal disagreements between the states.

The book does not gloss over some of the apparent complexities and contradictions of this period in American history. Davis reports, for example, the “comforting if puzzling” (p. 142) phenomenon of black citizens, both free and slave, volunteering to fight in the war on the Confederate Side. He highlights also the important role that Confederate women played in keeping food production and industry going, while their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers were away fighting the war. Women are credited also with supporting the strong religious values of the South and providing the moral backbone for political struggles such as the demand for food for the poor when the economy crashed and people were starving.

This is a book that does not try to preach any particular message about the Confederate philosophy and its ultimate defeat. The author shows the complexity of the political struggles and the combination of bravery and frailty that marks the decisions of leaders and ordinary people alike. If anyone is singled out for criticism, it is the landowning elites who tried to prosper at the expense of the poor and the weak, and the opportunistic merchants who made money out of warmongering and trade in basic goods. By narrating the small details of daily life, including episodes of looting and riots, to obtain bread to feed the children (p. 213), the author brings home the tremendous human cost of the war, not just in loss of lives in the actual conflict, but in the whole of society during this difficult period.

Davis, William C. *Look Away! A History of the Confederate States of America.*

New York:

Simon and Schuster, 2003.

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