



BOOK REVIEW:

Anders Bo Rasmussen. *Civil War Settlers: Scandinavians, Citizenship, and American Empire, 1848–1870*. Cambridge University Press, 2022. 292 pages. ISBN: 978-1108845564. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108980135>.

Sometimes it takes an outsider's perspective to tell a familiar story in a new way. Like every American child, I learned about the US Civil War in school, even though the people and scenes we studied were remote in time, space, and context from the Hawaiian island where I grew up. When I later moved to the midwestern United States and studied the experiences of Scandinavian immigrants, I became aware of Colonel Hans Christian Heg and his Scandinavian regiment's contributions to the Union cause, but I didn't initially think to connect them with the deeper ideological and political underpinnings of the war. It wasn't until reading Anders Bo Rasmussen's new, meticulously documented history, *Civil War Settlers: Scandinavians, Citizenship, and American Empire, 1848–1870*, that all the pieces fell into place for me, giving me an entirely new view of the well-worn story of interethnic American warfare in the mid-nineteenth century and how Scandinavian immigrants interacted with other players in that conflict.

Not only does Rasmussen succeed in telling the American story of the Civil War from a new angle in this book, he also challenges cherished myths about Scandinavian Americans' unqualified commitment to abolition and the unity of their new nation. His stated goal is to illuminate the lived experience of Scandinavian immigrant communities in the US during the third quarter of the nineteenth century and to examine the

factors that informed their worldview, particularly regarding slavery, military service, and the duties of American citizenship. His research confirms that Scandinavian immigrants, like their neighbors of various ethnicities, differed in their views on slavery and racial difference and made individual decisions about what to believe and how to act based on many more considerations than just ideology or skin color. Rasmussen situates nineteenth-century Scandinavian settler colonists within a larger discourse about racial hierarchies and political power and connects them both to other foreign-born communities in the US and to the Native American peoples whose displacement made the settler colonization of the American West possible.

Civil War Settlers is structured around three central questions: first, how did Old World ideology, not least related to territory and population, inform Scandinavian immigrants' attempts to navigate life in the New World? Second, why did Scandinavian immigrants overwhelmingly support the Republican Party between 1860 and 1868, when Irish and German immigrants, among other ethnic groups, did not? Third and finally, how did implicit and explicit American definitions of citizenship impact perceptions of ethnic identity and belonging among Scandinavian immigrants? (10). To answer these questions, Rasmussen takes a microhistorical approach that foregrounds thick description of a

single Scandinavian immigrant community in New Denmark, Wisconsin. Rasmussen focuses on ordinary people such as the farmer Fritz William Rasmussen and the pastor Claus Clausen in his own exploratory process of “narrowing the interpretive range based on the available information while weighing the impact of structural factors in relation to individual agency” (11). In this way, Rasmussen is able to tell several different, intertwined stories about individual Scandinavian immigrants and their ethno-national affinities, American exceptionalism and its blind spots, and the making of meaning out of disconnected and often fragmentary sources.

Part I: Settlers offers important context for the book’s larger argument by exploring the impact of the 1848 revolutions in Europe on Scandinavian settlers’ ideas about liberty, equality, and ethnic hierarchies, particularly in relation to the new Republican Party’s positions. While the desire for political liberty and social equality were certainly motivating factors for Scandinavian immigration, he emphasizes repeatedly that Scandinavians came to the US primarily in search of (free) land, which made them in general indifferent or actively unsympathetic to the attempts of Native Americans and African Americans to retain or acquire the same thing. He notes, “Scandinavian immigrants, not least the Scandinavian elite, perceiving themselves as superior to other ethnic groups, directly and indirectly supported an American imperial project defined by territorial expansion and conflict with nonwhite and, to an extent, non-Protestant peoples” (13).

According to the primary source documents Rasmussen excerpts, Scandinavian immigrants generally did not apply their own desire for freedom and equality to the government’s treatment of Native Americans, nor to the opportunities available to freed slaves. He cites Jon Gjerde’s assessment that Scandinavian immigrants “transferred the despotism of Europe to the unfreedom of the nonwhite as a vehicle to

juxtapose their freedom in the United States” (146), claiming their own freedom at the expense of others’.

Part II: Citizens homes in on the Scandinavian immigrant experience with regard to pan-Scandinavian trends, racial hierarchies, religious and political divisions within the Scandinavian American community, and the duties of citizenship. The outbreak of the Civil War tested Scandinavians’ beliefs in the promises of America and their willingness to bleed and die for them. Rasmussen notes that the frequency with which Scandinavian-born immigrants resisted military service during the war confirms that “Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish immigrants entered the military based on a complex set of motivations that was often as much about economic and political opportunity (and social perceptions of honor) as it was about love for the adopted country or anti-slavery sentiment” (105). While Scandinavian American newspapers defended different positions on abolition and enlistment, leaders within the Scandinavian American community pushed for the creation of a Scandinavian military regiment in order to correct Scandinavians’ marginal position relative to the American political and economic establishment. Meanwhile, his detailed reconstruction of Danish-American negotiations over the possibility of resettling freed African Americans in the Danish Virgin Islands instead of Liberia in order to address the labor shortage there serves as a reminder of Denmark’s own entanglement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and Caribbean colonization.

In *Part III: Colonialists*, Rasmussen returns to the topic of the Danish West Indies, this time with regard to the Lincoln administration’s interest in purchasing them (which was thwarted by Lincoln’s assassination), a discussion that brackets his treatment of the postwar negotiations of Scandinavian immigrants and freedpeople for social, political, and economic advancement in

the post-Civil War United States. Some Scandinavian soldiers, such as Christian Christensen and Fritz Rasmussen, gained a more inclusive racial perspective from their military service, but the same cannot be said of all their countrymen, most of whom felt at best ambivalent about freedpeople's civil rights. Rasmussen explains that although "Scandinavian-born soldiers often abhorred violence against freedpeople, few examples exist of them pro-actively fighting for Black citizenship, voting rights, and equality in the Civil War's immediate aftermath" (267). Citizenship and land (re)distribution were central concerns for both Scandinavian immigrants and freed slaves, but Scandinavian Americans generally saw little commonality between the groups and believed themselves superior to Black freedpeople. In the Reconstruction era, Scandinavian American leaders were preoccupied with securing their own political influence, most often through ardent support for the Republican Party, and had little interest in extending citizenship, suffrage, or economic opportunities to the formerly enslaved, Native Americans, or, for that matter, women of all races.

Civil War Settlers is a tour de force that makes a timely and eloquent contribution to both American Studies and Scandinavian Studies. Rasmussen does a brilliant job of bringing this tumultuous time period to life, infusing it with the kind of vivid historical detail that reminds us how complicated and precarious people's lives have always been. He efficiently sketches out the larger patterns of Scandinavian immigration, settlement, military service, religious beliefs, and political activism in the mid to late nineteenth century, then fills in this framework with compelling individual stories, such as that of Fritz Rasmussen's wife Sidsel in New Denmark, Wisconsin, who struggled to raise her children alone during her husband's military service, worried (with justification, as it turned out) about the

dangers of repeated childbirth, and her attempts to grasp moments of autonomy within a patriarchal system that constrained her choices.

Throughout the book, Rasmussen drives home his main points very effectively, if a little repetitively at times, namely that Scandinavian immigrants were attracted by the vision of "America as a place with opportunities for land-ownership, social mobility, and central citizenship rights" (328), but were not overly concerned with sharing these benefits with Native Americans, African Americans, or women. The Civil War brought some of these areas of concern into alignment, but also highlighted, through resistance to military service, the limits of what Scandinavian immigrants were willing to do in exchange for the citizenship, liberty, and equality that they sought in the US. In the postwar era, progressive midwestern politics largely ignored people of color, supporting American imperial expansion over universal equality. As evidence of how successful Rasmussen's insightful new analysis of this contentious period of American history is, particularly thanks to the trove of primary sources he has uncovered and brought together, *Civil War Settlers* won the Danish American Heritage Society's inaugural book prize in 2023.

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