Virginia Reviews


Children (one hopes) learn early on that libraries are good places to go for a variety of reasons. What they may not know is that libraries can do far more than simply provide books and information—just as children (and adults too) may not know that Virginia’s state library in Richmond performs a multitude of services that often happen out of the public eye and awareness. Hobbs’s and Harper’s book explains to students aged eight to twelve that the Library of Virginia archives and preserves famous and less well-known materials ranging from Patrick Henry’s law office’s ledgers to a copy of Edgar Allan Poe’s first work, a textbook on sea-shells he helped compile.

Mixing cartoon-style characters, including famous Virginians, with drawings and photographs of historic Virginia buildings and events, Hobbs opens with a “welcome” to the Library of Virginia that promises a glimpse of the “thousands of exciting stories” kept there—and history at its best really should be stories, after all. Hobbs explains what an archive is, the kinds of historical documents the library archives, and how the library came to be, and finally concludes with some impressive statistics: among other collections, the library contains 823,500 books and 690,000 “born digital” records housed within 316,500 total square feet. In case any student has a fear of history, Hobbs opens the next part of the book with the familiar: the Declaration of Independence, of which the library has an early printing.

But the lesser-known works are where the book hits its historical stride. A Culpeper County survey done by the seventeen-year-old George Washington is one such treasure; so is a Revolutionary War veteran’s petition, which comes with its own illustrated story, as does the tale of an African-American Revolutionary War spy named James Lafayette.

One illustration shows a cheerfully hungry fellow taking his drink and bag of chips into a reading room….
HOBBBS REVIEW

But, the book asks, “Can’t you just put [these items] on a shelf and leave it at that?” The enemies of books and manuscripts are represented by threatening cartoon characters, including Fred the Flame, Mildred Mold, and other children may not be aware of, such as Acid Andy—referring to the acid found innately in many old pages that destroys them from within. The “Archival Hall of Horror” offers a gruesome look at the potential fate of items not carefully preserved, followed by a glimpse of how much meticulous effort goes into archival work. Another illustrated story provides an example as well as a surprise—the restoration work on a painting of an English noblewoman revealed a slightly different painting beneath the surface. Students learn who can use an archive and how—not just for academic research, but also for more personal quests like genealogy. A glossary and web links conclude the book.

The book doesn’t come alone; it represents the core of an education and outreach packet for teachers containing seven ready-made exercises, including a crossword puzzle and a word scramble, reinforcing every subject the book touches. Also for the teacher’s benefit is a substantial list of ways the book correlates with the Virginia Standards of Learning.

As is often the case with a good nonfiction work, Hobbs’s book provides more lessons than the obvious one. Students will come away not only knowing more about what the Library of Virginia does, but also understanding what libraries in general do, whether or not they archive famous documents. Even keeping “ordinary” books on public shelves presents challenges of which students may not be aware. On the flip side, Hobbs and Harper make it clear that one of the biggest threats to paper works is people themselves. Readers harm books not out of malice, but through neglect or obliviousness. One illustration shows a cheerfully hungry fellow taking his drink and bag of chips into a reading room despite the warning sign. Whether or not readers ever visit the Library of Virginia itself, one hopes they will take away the idea that they should be careful around and protective of all books, regardless of what they are and where they originated.
Mostly, though, *To Collect, Protect, and Serve* is an open invitation. The library can seem intimidating or overwhelming even to adults, and certainly to children. This book is the literary equivalent of a children’s librarian kneeling in front of her prospective young patrons and holding out her hand to welcome them into a place they might not otherwise go. Even better, it may encourage children to ask more questions about books, libraries, and archiving in their own local or school libraries.

—Danny Adams, evening services librarian assistant, Ferrum College


*The Alphabet of Vietnam* is a meditation on the duality of human nature. The book reveals a postmodern window into the dark side in all of us, as revealed by the brutality of postindustrial warfare. It’s not a book for everyone. Anyone sensitive to issues of race, religion, or patriotism could be put off or offended by the work (not that the book is actually guilty of these offenses). Nonetheless, it’s an amazingly intelligent and insightful work that reveals much truth about humanity for anyone willing to venture forth into its pages.

The title refers to the abecadery in the titles of the subchapters: “N is for Napalm,” “B is for Baby Killer.” Some of the actual sentences used in the book are equally blunt, but most are far more subtle—appropriate for the metaphorical themes the book takes on.

Chamberlain narrates the story through protagonist Joe Glauss, who lost his brother Jack in Vietnam. The narrative moves back and forth between three time periods in Joe’s life: the period in which he travels to Vietnam to understand his brother’s death, the time when he tries to rescue a woman he believes is pregnant with his brother’s son, and the present in which he tries to piece his life back together with his new romantic interest, Alice. The other parts of the story are told as flashbacks, providing reference points in relation to those three periods. It’s complex and confusing at times, but Chamberlain uses the time switches to periodically reveal key bits of information that create suspense throughout the novel.

The author holds off on exposition in the beginning, revealing information as the narrative progresses. Much like a Hitchcock film, the opening is dull and awkward, but if the audience can sit through the first fifteen pages (or minutes of the film), they will be treated to an amazingly dark and gripping tunnel of suspense. Unlike Hitchcock, who usually provided too much dry, conversational exposition, Chamberlain doesn’t provide enough, leaving the reader initially wondering what real purpose several of the characters serve. (Perhaps he’s trying to epitomize the worthlessness Jack sees in them.)

The second part of the narrative involves Joe Glauss traveling to Vietnam as a tourist. He wants to understand what happened to his brother. He’s also trying to translate and publish a wonderful set of poems by a hitherto unknown female Vietnamese poet. (Pay close attention for the brief Christopher Walken *Deer Hunter* reference.) He visits the Museum of American War Atrocities, draws obvious parallels between Vietnam and Iraq, and reads his brother’s letters in his spare time. This part of the book offers some amazing insights and comparisons between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, juxtaposing the creativity of art and literature against the potential absolutism of “might makes right.”

The third section and other points in the narrative are much more gripping. The letters Jack leaves behind are alcohol-induced ramblings and confessions of an incredibly sorrowful and violent nature. Jack and his friend Wash (an ex-pimp and ex-con turned enlisted man from a basically segregated part of New York) commit atrocities in Vietnam that compare with the worst from the My Lai Massacre. Jack and Wash continue their unaccountable rampage back home in Appalachian Virginia after the war, until Jack’s guilt becomes too much. Jack leaves Joe a note asking him to stop Wash and rescue a girl named Maddie; he believes she’s pregnant with his child. Events climax one drunken evening amidst sex and violence at Wash’s cabin deep in the Appalachians. Jack’s pre-suicidal ramblings, coupled with Wash’s dark view of life, really make the high point of the book. Chamberlain mixes in brief asides from Hans von Clausewitz and the Marquis de Sade to create a postmodern philosophical masterpiece. One could wish he’d dug deeper, but with postmodern relativistic ramblings like these, philosophers are sure to chase their tails *ad infinitum* into madness (which Chamberlain surely knew).

The main issue is that several
characters in the book are not developed enough. Wash seems like a two-dimensional bad guy. Chamberlain reveals just enough of his past to give reason to his madness, but not enough to make him believable. He needs more background. Alice seems pointless and out of place except as a reminder of the book's constant theme of the dark side of humankind, a theme that isn't visible in her until the last ten pages. The book climaxes well before the reader sees any third dimension to her character. Three hundred pages are not enough to do this story justice. The characters need to be fleshed out more. The Alphabet of Vietnam is an example of an excellent book that needs to be better.

The bottom line is that The Alphabet of Vietnam is sophisticated, revealing many dark truths about American culture to which most people will simply turn a deaf ear. While the book suffers from a few developmental and narrative issues, it is an incredibly worthy piece of literature that deserves to be read and taken seriously.

—Joseph Yamine, English professor and writer from Roanoke


After their brush with closing this past year, one can hardly blame LSU Press for marketing this paperback reissue of Pace's outstanding study as a Civil War book. After all, there is a fascinating chapter on the effect of the war on colleges and their students, and nothing seems to sell better in the South these days than a book on the War Between the States. This book is one of the relatively rare academic histories that will appeal to a wide audience, and it belongs in both academic and public libraries. That is not because it is a great account of the war, though it does describe some of the war's participants; it is because this readable little volume is an example of history writing at its best.

Pace successfully combines meticulous scholarship with a clear, direct writing style functioning in a logically organized narrative. Moreover, this book is an example of the best work in American history because the author uses copious primary sources—including over ninety unpublished archives—to show in the students' own words what concerned them in their collegiate environment. When they write a few sentences home for money for clothes, the reader is given a glimpse of family life that is far more immediate and powerful than a dozen general statements about life in the ante-bellum South. Pace acknowledges in his introduction that he is responding to E. Metron Coulter's classic College Life in the Old South from 1928 (and to some extent Helen Horowitz's Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present), but it is clear that Pace's scope is much broader than that of Coulter and that his evidence is drawn from a rigorous exploration of the primary materials available. While his conclusions about the culture of the well-to-do Southerners who sent their sons to liberal arts colleges are sometimes refinements of older ideas rather than new observations, his success as a storyteller assures readers a clear and complete look at the era.

Virginians, particularly those of us who have attended—or paid for children to attend—the modern versions of the seven colleges (of twenty-one from all the Southern states combined) in the Old Dominion that Pace includes in his study, will feel a personal connection to the young men whose accounts come to life thanks to the author's research. But Pace is doing more than telling entertaining stories; he is using the students' own words to provide evidence to support his conclusions about the quality of honor as it was understood in Southern society, most particularly that "Being a man of honor in the South meant that one exhibited a persona that conformed to the society's expectation. Appearance superseded content." Learning to maintain the necessary appearances was the unacknowledged curriculum of college life as Pace describes it, with accounts of how students learned to handle everything from academics to fashion to race to entertainment to violent confrontations.

The portrait of Southern society Pace outlines makes the South's precipitous rush toward war a bit more understandable, as it does the endurance of the Confederate States in a long and costly conflict. So this is a book for both the Civil War buff and for the twenty-first century Southerner who cannot fathom why "honor" required such remarkable sacrifices.

—Cy Dillon, Hampden-Sydney College

McClurken, Jeffrey W. Take Care of the Living: Reconstructing Confederate Veteran Families in Virginia. Charlottesville and London: University of

McClurken, chair of the Department of History and American Studies at the University of Mary Washington, has written this book for the University of Virginia Press series A Nation Divided: Studies in the Civil War Era. It is a scholarly work, dense with documentation, in which he explores the short- and long-term impact of the war on Confederate veterans and their families at all societal levels in Pittsylvania County.

The author contends that Pittsylvania County (which for the purposes of the book includes what is now the independent city of Danville) provides an ideal place to measure the human consequences of the war. Four-fifths of the men of service age were in front-line Confederate units. One quarter of them died, and half survived after being wounded, seriously ill, or incarcerated as prisoners of war. Since no battles were actually fought in Pittsylvania County, the corresponding lack of property damage allows the author to attribute familial changes solely to injuries to people.

McClurken investigates the strategies Pittsylvania families employed to deal with war’s consequences. He focuses on four areas of support for the veterans and their families: their own extended network of families and friends; churches; the well-to-do, or elite, citizens of the county; and the state. He narrows his focus to particular cases to illustrate this support. For example, only Baptist churches are used to highlight the benevolence that faith communities distributed to veterans and surviving family members. The reader is left to assume other denominations behaved similarly.

The Baptist churches of the county provided emotional and spiritual support, and in some cases they hired veterans or relatives of veterans or provided monetary assistance to their own members. Rev. J. E. L. Holmes of Danville stated, “It is well to raise monuments to the dead, but I think it is far better to take care of the living” (86). In an interesting sidebar, McClurken teases out some of the gender issues of the day; when a woman seeks assistance, her case is adjudicated by a team of men from the church, and that panel is also the conduit for help. When a man seeks assistance, the aid is given directly to him without review. It appears that there was a lack of trust on the part of the churches in a woman’s ability to handle money.

In the section highlighting petitions for aid directed to what the author calls “the elite,” he uses only the example of William T. Sutherlin, the county’s preeminent citizen. A manufacturer, farmer, banker, mayor of Danville, and one of the county’s delegates to the 1861 state secession convention, it is not surprising that his correspondence, including many pleas for help, survived to document this difficult era. This section of the book is the most interesting; the author effectively uses a significant number of direct quotations from the writers who ask Sutherlin for intervention. Many go to great lengths to establish a connection to him in these letters, tenuous though it may be. The desperation in the letters is palpable, however, and it is clear the writers believe Suterlin to be the type of person who will help. Many of them were indeed granted their requests for assistance.

McClurken’s concluding chapters describe the ways psychological help was provided to veterans and their families, as well as the impact of the Virginia Pension Acts of 1888, 1900, and 1902. The author concludes by stating that no one source of support—families, church, the wealthy, or the state—would have been sufficient for the veterans and their families, but that it took all of them to “take care of the living.”

This is a scholarly work and should be of particular help to those who are researching the impact of the war on populations relatively immune from the effect of battles. It is also of interest to those who want to know how Virginia veterans and their families fared after the war. McClurken has created two large databases for the project, one of which documents the soldiers of the county, and one which incorporates the entire 1860 and 1870 manuscript population censuses as well as the 1860 slave schedules for the county. Both are potentially valuable compilations.

—Diane S. Adkins, director, Pittsylvania County Public Library System


Many history books claim that Henry Wirz, the notorious commander of Camp Sumer near Andersonville, Georgia, was the only Confederate executed for war crimes. In fact, he was the second; the first, nearly as infamous as Wirz when the war ended, was Champ Ferguson, a guerilla fighter of the Cumberland region of
south-central Kentucky and north-central Tennessee credited with over one hundred civilian murders during the war, and successfully charged with more than fifty of those.

As McKnight points out, there was little in Ferguson’s pre-war life to indicate that he would become the Confederacy’s most famous outlaw. He was married twice, once widowed; had two children, one of whom died at the age of three; and was a farmer who became affluent enough to own three slaves. It wasn’t until 1858, when Ferguson was thirty-seven years old, that he killed his first man—probably in self-defense, though he may have been the initial instigator in the situation. Ironically, Ferguson would claim self-defense in all of the killings that ultimately led to his hanging.

At the time of the war’s outbreak in 1861, Cumberland was full of Unionists, perhaps outnumbering those who sympathized with the Confederacy. But McKnight quotes Ferguson’s reason for joining the Confederacy, which had nothing to do with politics or regionalism, but was a direct consequence of his murder charge: “When the war broke out, I was induced to join the army on the promise that all prosecution in the case would be abandoned.” While Ferguson did eventually join the army briefly, his guerilla career started immediately. His modus operandi was generally the same: he would hunt down or run across people he knew to be pro-Union, always civilians, and murder them with either a gun or a knife, sometimes stabbing them after they’d been shot.

If challenged about the murder later, he invariably insisted either that it was one of his men who did the killing, or that the victim had been hunting him for some time and would have killed Ferguson first if given the chance. “Each of us had twenty to thirty proscribed enemies,” Ferguson explained, “and it was regarded as legitimate to kill them at any time, at any place, under any circumstances.”

While connected with the regular army, Ferguson fought as a soldier, pursuing no vendettas even when close to his Unionist enemies, with one major exception. Several witnesses testified to him killing as many as twelve men during the infamous massacre of wounded black soldiers after the Battle of Saltville in southwest Virginia. Even while admitting to many other civilian murders before his trial and execution, he denied participating in the massacre.

After the war ended, so did Ferguson’s campaigns. He no longer pursued those who had been Unionists; likewise, he befriended many of his Federal soldier guards. By then, of course, the bloody work was done. He and his men were the only guerillas denied peaceful surrender due to their activities and notoriety, and Ferguson would hang in October 1865, four months after Appomattox.

In the years following Ferguson’s hanging—aftter a trial so famous that the U.S. government held off trying Henry Wirz until it was over—Ferguson became a sort of dark Robin Hood to sympathizers of the “Lost Cause,” as well as a few more recent historians. Support for the executed guerilla went from basic apologetics—“Everyone was doing it and some were worse”—to inventing stories of atrocities against his family by Union soldiers that even Ferguson himself denied before his hanging. Stories cropped up for decades that he had secretly escaped his hanging and lived in hiding.

McKnight’s recounting of Ferguson’s violent career is not dispassionate, but hardly sensational; as a good historian should do, he allows readers to react to each brutality not by telling them what to think but by presenting the reactions of those who were present, quoting Ferguson’s own accounts, or offering both side by side (especially when they contradict each other). What McKnight does especially well is connect Ferguson’s words and actions into a tapestry that makes his motivations seem obvious, such as his repeated assertions that every killing (at least the ones he admitted to) was in self-defense—many of these assertions practically verbatim. While McKnight traces Ferguson’s wartime life chronologically, he does so in such a transparent way that undeniable patterns of force emerge, all of which have Ferguson at their epicenter.

The author doesn’t present Ferguson’s activities in a vacuum, but against the larger picture of the war in the Appalachian South. He notes numerous examples that there was indeed heavy guerilla fighting (and cold-blooded killing) through Tennessee and Kentucky. However, the mosaic he assembles makes it clear that far from fitting in with what everyone else was doing, as Ferguson and his supporters claimed, Ferguson’s viciousness stood out amid the ongoing terror.

There are almost countless books on the Civil War’s major actions and personalities, but far fewer on the war’s regional aspects, and fewer still about irregular warfare. McKnight’s book is not the first about Ferguson—he started
making such appearances during the war itself—but it does seem to be the most thorough and perhaps the most accurate as well. It doesn’t shy away from horrors, but likewise doesn’t push them in readers’ faces. Overall, Confederate Outlaw is an even-handed look at a bloodthirsty time and the complex, beyond-the-obvious motivations that many people had to stay out of the war’s regular action in favor of fighting on home soil.

—Danny Adams, evening services librarian assistant, Ferrum College


True to its namesake, The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture is a series of critical essays creating a reference guide to the southern and southeastern United States. Volume 17, the most recent, covers various topics dealing with the history and evolution of education in the South. It begins wonderfully and appropriately with an invocation from the works of William Faulkner (which is also ironic, as his work has never been the most flattering about the South).

The book covers events in the history of Southern education as far back as the pre-Colonial period and as recent as No Child Left Behind. It focuses largely on higher education, but pays sufficient attention to elementary education and the beginnings of compulsory education. It discusses political and economic influences on education, as well as how education was shaped during periods of war and social upheaval.

Historians and educators from colleges and universities across the South contribute the various articles; many contributors are from the Deep South. This volume’s editor, Clarence Mohr, offers an encompassing introductory article giving a general overview of the history of education in the South. His theme is nothing new or surprising. Education in the South has evolved slowly and sometimes painfully over the centuries, due largely to issues of race, religion, and rural geography. The other major articles include topics that expand on these issues. Several refute common misconceptions about Southern education, while others confirm and support perceived misconceptions. For instance, the progressives of the 1920s and activists of the 1960s were much more prominent than historically perceived (though still not quite as active as at schools in the North and West), and integration and universal education in places like New Orleans began much earlier (as far back as the mid-1800s) than most people realize. Slavery apologists and the general mistrust of the intelligentsia, however, are very real elements (that no one wants to admit) in Southern culture in relation to education.

About halfway through the text, these articles end and a series of shorter articles begin. The shorts are biographies of important educators and historical descriptions of schools across the South (colleges and universities). Several noteworthy Virginia schools are covered, including William & Mary, Hampden–Sydney, and the Virginia Military Institute.

Some of the larger articles seem redundant, reiterating over and over how race relations have stymied educational advancement in the South, or consistently repeating how agrarian culture clashed over the decades with all but vocational education. Almost every article starts the same way: “(Insert topic here) reflects the cultural, economic, and political history of the South.” At the same time, several more unique topics like homeschooling and John T. Scopes receive barely any attention at all. Finally, the diversity of authors both helps and hinders the book. The variety is limited to authors in and around the South (but then, who more qualified?). It is up to the reader to decide what this does for the objectivity and moderation of the work. Surprisingly, all the different voices hold the theme consistently, only delving occasionally into cacophony.

All that aside, it’s a well-written, intelligent reference book that will be indispensable for decades as a starting point for academic research on the topic of Southern education.

—Joseph Yamine, English professor and writer from Roanoke