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Mark M. Smith, *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. xii, 197. ISBN 978-0-19-975998-9.

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The first historian to mention smells, in battle and beyond, was the first historian of war and politics—Herodotus. He notes the intoxicating hashish of the Massagetai (1.202), the sweet smell of perfumed Arabia, a smellscape (3.113), an “Ethiopian” spring of water redolent of violets (3.23), and the most foul smelling thing—the beard of he-goats from which the Arabs concoct a perfume (3.112). In a military context, he writes that, when Croesus’s Lydian cavalry attacked Cyrus’s Persian forces before Sardis, Cyrus, on the advice of a Mede Harpagos, had set his baggage camels in front of them as a stratagem, because horses are frightened by camels’ odor and appearance (1.80).¹ Thucydides has less to say about sensory impressions, but does mention the unendurable stench of the quarries where Athenian POWs were penned by their Syracusan captors (7.87). Prisoner of war camps were no better in the American Civil war, as photographs of maltreated and emaciated Union prisoners at Andersonville prove (cf. 187n48). But *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege* is the first work to examine sensory perceptions in war in a sustained fashion (5).

Historian Mark Smith (Univ. of South Carolina) aims to provide “a sensory history” of the US Civil War; he explores not only the war’s smells (gunpowder, decomposing corpses, etc.) and tastes of (e.g., the cooked mules and rats in besieged Vicksburg, spoiled army rations), but also its horrific sights (wrecked homes and towns and broken bodies), sounds (booming cannons), and tactile sensations (e.g., the unwashed, lice-ridden bodies of the men turning the crankshaft in the cramped spaces of the CSS *Hunley*). Mid-nineteenth-century Americans had passed noise regulations, started to develop urban sewer systems, segregated certain offensive industries, and rushed to be photographed, eternalizing the sight. But how we in the era of jets and jackhammers and processed foods perceive loudness or freshness and taste differs from the nineteenth century’s experience of sensory data. Can one even aspire to write a history of the senses? Smith has explored this conundrum before,² and the “sensory turn” (151) has become a trendy methodology.

The author argues that the American Civil War “rearranged the sensory experiences of the participants” (6), civilians as well as soldiers. He must recognize that the totality of the senses afflicted participants in battles, sieges, and submarine life, but he chooses to devote one chapter to each sense in separate events. He asserts that sensory history demands a “sustained” effort to record and evoke how bodies “fester, reek, and writhe on the battlefield” (4). Sight and sound have always outranked the “proximate senses of smell, taste, and touch” (45). Herodotus quotes (perhaps from Heraclitus) the proverb “Men trust their ears less than their eyes” (1.8). Lorenz Oken (1779–1851), a natural historian and student of Goethe’s, postulated a hierarchy of civilizations based on sense-race correlations: in descending order, the European eye-man, the Asiatic ear-man, the Amerindian nose-man, the Australian tongue-man, and, at the intellectual nadir, the African skin-man. Science here served and preserved widespread ethnic prejudices.

In chapter 1, “The Sounds of Secession,” Smith listens to urban, slave-based Charleston before and during the much anticipated act of rejecting the federal union. The noise of rowdy secessionists contrasts with the “quiet, deafening quiet, shiver-inducing quiet” (17) of the anxious slaves, always living under a nighttime curfew. “The sculpted world of Charleston’s soundscape underwent a profound change, “mutating from that of a muted, civilized city to a Union-busting “clamor that spilled beyond..., deluging the land ... with the force of hurricane-driven waters” (18–19). Men’s voices roared, women’s scarves snapped, halls resounded

1. Cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 7.1.27.

2. His *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2008) hustles through eras from antiquity to the present in five brief chapters.

with applause (23), when the leaders signed the ordinance of secession. To his credit, Smith depends on contemporary records of sounds and tastes, rather than imagining them.

Union commander Maj. Robert Anderson faced the ever louder, chuntering voices of Charleston before moving his too few troops to the relative safety of Fort Sumter. Smith emphasizes the all-enveloping noise of rebel and Union guns starting on 12 April 1861. After the fort's surrender, "the whole shore rang with the glad shouts of thousands" (160n67). The "loudest four years on American soil" (38) had begun in earnest.

Smith begins chapter 2, "Eyeing First Bull Run" (21 July 1861), like all the others, with a vignette of a specific person's situation before the big picture unrolls: in this case, the fatal if unsurprising dependence on the eye, fostered by the military training of generals Irvin McDowell and P.T.G. Beauregard (*nomen omen*). Stonewall Jackson on this day was better at using both ears and eyes in anticipating the enemy. "Battle muddled the senses generally" (46). Sight misled disoriented men and officers obtunded by musketry flashes, cannon smoke, dust clouds of marchers, and the firing of troops hidden in thickets or uneven terrain or mustered on manmade cuts and Virginia's hills. The other senses, especially in green troops, were overtaxed by whistling bullets, sulfurous air, and the screams of stricken beasts and wounded men. Most soldiers were untested before this battle fought only some twenty-five miles from Washington;³ many civilians on both sides took in the spectacle. The lack of consistent uniforms at this early moment in the four-year war made it difficult for both spectators and soldiers to distinguish friend from foe. Some Union men wore gray (e.g., the 69th New York regiment), and some Confederates wore blue, not as a deliberate tactic,⁴ but because they had only the clothing provided to their ragtag local militias years before. Some units sported colors belonging to neither side, including the soi-disant Zouaves of the 14th Brooklyn regiment, whom Stonewall Jackson dubbed "red-legged devils"!

The commanders anticipated but did not solve the problem of whether to order their men to fire on other troops dressed in the same colors. Workarounds included white armbands, hand gestures, watchwords, feathers in hats, and even a gesture—"right hand on forehead, palm out, with the word 'Sumter' [written on it]" (60)—a short-range response that failed miserably. Union casualties and panic eventually erased any visual order and confidence. The postmortems by both sides agreed that confusion over uniform colors yielded the raucous outcome of Confederate victory (63).

Union nurse "Cornelia Hancock's Sense of Smell," comes into play in chapter 3, on Gettysburg, her first battle.⁵ The smell of peaches ripening and new mown hay before 1 July 1863 gave way to horrible sights, sounds, and stenches in the following hot spell—lurid corpses,⁶ gangrenous wounded flesh, hundreds of horse carcasses.⁷ On the third day of battle, the wounded lay "upon heaps of manure, reeking with rain, tormented by vermin" (76). Given the country's deficiencies, even in peacetime, in urban sanitation and environmental deodorization,⁸ the fields around Gettysburg stank of putrefaction until the first frost.⁹

3. The book's three maps (Charleston Harbor, First Bull Run, and Vicksburg) are greatly reduced, virtually illegible reproductions of Civil War-era prints. The marginally better sixteen "figures," too, are drawn from contemporary prints and photographs. It is disappointing that so respected a publisher as Oxford University Press has often seen fit to spare only a half page or less per map or figure in a book with a 6.5"x4" trim size.

4. Spies, both male and female, on both sides did employ visual deceptions.

5. Smith might have alluded to historiography's most famous facial protuberance, immortalized in Blaise Pascal's physiognomic hypothesis: "Had Cleopatra's nose been shorter, the whole face of the world would have changed." See Daniel Boorstin, *Cleopatra's Nose: Essays on the Unexpected* (NY: Vintage, 1994). In any event, the Ptolemaic queen's coinage attests to her imposing nasal endowment.

6. Smith incorrectly states that "about 10,000 Americans died in that roughly one-hour interval" (74), i.e., of Pickett's Charge. A little less than eight thousand were killed during the whole of the three-day battle. See John W. Busey and David G. Martin, *Regimental Strengths and Losses at Gettysburg*, 4th ed. (Hightstown, NJ: Longstreet House, 2005).

7. Fig. 3.3 reproduces a Timothy O'Sullivan photograph, "Dead Horses of Bigelow's (Ninth Massachusetts) Battery, 1863."

8. Smith provides a useful bibliography (169n30) on nineteenth-century attitudes towards smell, which reflected the Victorian age determination to conquer the stink of cities and even households with a cleanliness symbolizing godliness, decency, and an immutable social order.

9. Smith mentions, without elaborating, the use of "stink ball" shells containing ether and guano.

Chapter 4, “The Hollowing of Vicksburg,” concerns the seven-week siege and bombardment of the city, which ended on the Fourth of July 1863. High above the banks of the Mississippi, this center of commerce (rail yards, slave pens) and industry (cotton gins), the South’s last stronghold on the internal supply line of the river, presented an alluring chokepoint to Federal forces troops trying to bisect the Confederacy. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant strove to starve the enemy into submission, and starve they did, despite Confederate Gen. John Pemberton’s careful measures to stockpile reserves. Some rebels thought Pemberton’s ultimate surrender was the result of treason or gross incompetence. Smith’s focus is, understandably, on the good food available at this critical entrepôt before and during the war, until its forced resort to tasteless and eventually repulsive food as the siege wore on. He reports menus from fancy restaurants, featuring vegetables, fish, and meats, fine European wines, fruits, and desserts—for affluent whites only, of course.¹⁰ Many steamboats had, in former days, stocked up on “delectable goodies” (88) at Vicksburg. Smith observes that, in the mid-nineteenth century, taste indexed social class, and only the educated had refined palates. (He says little about the white working classes here or elsewhere in the book.)

Military sieges had been rare in the New World before 1861. But Grant’s successful sieges prompted Mark Twain to compare the general’s *Memoirs* to Julius Caesar’s *Gallic War Commentaries*;¹¹ both commanders excelled in psychological warfare. Sieges degraded all gustatory sophistication and conventions of the urban South. Grant’s strangulation of Vicksburg lasted from 25 May to Independence Day. His thirty-five thousand soldiers subsisted on the crops of surrounding farms, humiliating the planters and allowing no one out of the city, except for a few able-bodied African-Americans. Smith details the cave and tunnel digging of the bombarded city-dwellers, and the counter-mining by Union forces in Vicksburg’s soft soil. It was not so easy for the white urban cavemen and women to keep the races segregated in the city’s bomb shelters. Both sides were eating poorly, but the Union soldiers’ bad water and sowbelly were preferable to no water and rat meat.

Like the Spartans at Plataea (429–427 BCE) or the Romans at Saguntum (219 BCE), where it was rumored that parents had eaten their children, Grant created a human behavioral sink at Vicksburg, a community where the very soldiers defending the city increased its suffering by the addition of twelve thousand more mouths to feed. Joyless mastication replaced the feasts of recent yore. One girl ate her pet bird; others ate frogs, mules, and cats; the price of rats rose as “demand ... apparently outpaced supply” (105). Ugly odors of rotting cattle and pets dampened civilian hunger. After the surrender, it was learned that Pemberton had hoarded vast reserves of food for his army, reserves still untouched when he surrendered because he despaired of help penetrating Union lines. Confederate troops and civilians hated their commander as much as the victorious Yankees. The chapter closes with a lame foodways pun: the South would soon be eating humble pie (114).

Chapter 5, “The *Hunley*’s Impact,” describes the sinking of the USS *Housatonic* with three hundred crewmen on 17 February 1864. The hull of the attacking, forty-foot long Confederate sub *H.L. Hunley* was four feet in height and forty-two inches in width. This made for a brutal underwater compaction of the eight strong men who supplied the sweaty motor power. At least two previous volunteer crews had died of suffocation in trials of the submersed ironclad. A third team was sent out of Charleston harbor to break the Union blockade.¹²

The book’s epilogue explores Gen. William T. Sherman’s intent during his march to the sea to “stun their [Georgians’] senses, throwing them back into the howling-wilderness past that white Southerners fancied they had long left behind” (135). His sixty thousand filthy, often barefoot troopers cut a sixty-mile-wide

10. The diet of blacks, by contrast, was “distinctly impoverished, ... numbingly bland, ... nutritionally feeble, frequently monotonous” (90).

11. Admittedly, Twain was acting as de facto agent, marketing director, and publicist for Grant, who won his race against time to provide financial security for his family by completing his memoirs before succumbing to throat cancer in 1885. See Charles Bracelen Flood, *Grant’s Final Victory: Ulysses S. Grant’s Heroic Last Year* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2011). Caesar’s account of his two-way siege of Alesia and capture of Vercingetorix (52 BCE) appears in book 7 of the *Gallic Wars*.

12. For more information on the vessel, recovered in 2000, see the Friends of the *Hunley* website – www.miwsr.com/rd/1429.htm.

swath of terror in a “sensory assault” on the Confederate South, a new nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created unequal. The Union axes chopped, the soldiers sang “Yankee Doodle”; Southerners saw and smelled the black smoke of burning buildings and piney woods; meals—for invaded and invaders—were savorless; women, both white and black, were “manhandled, prodded, choked, sometimes raped” (142–44).¹³ The author reflects that “This [destruction of the Southern world order] was all to the good and wholly necessary, for from the degradation came national dignity...” (146).

Smith could have enriched this engaging experimental study of the archaeology of American sense activities by adding some consideration of proxemics and chronemics, the human uses of space and time. In fact, he often discusses both congested and empty spaces, the “howling wilderness” (135) where white men were scarce. Proxemic observations are common in the chapters on taste and touch, but not effectively developed. Smith is often discussing tactemics—human reactions to “cramped quarters, “skin-rubbing closeness,”—not the mere sensation of touch. But, in general, he does not apply to his sensory analyses more recent and relevant approaches to social experience. The methods of cognitive psychology find no place here, a defect another scholar may remedy.

The restriction of each of the book’s chapters to a single sense is regrettable, since no account can dispense with visual impressions. The author rectifies this to an extent in the epilogue and in his imaginatively poetic style of writing: “gaslights ... allowed the stars to dance, splashing dollops of light on the men” (9). The *Hunley* “looked now for all the world like a gaping fish, replete with sheeny scales.... The copper-clad torpedo was, through the sheer momentum of the *Hunley*, plunged into the guts of the warship...” (130).

The senses deserve the scholarly attention they now attract among anthropologists, sociologists, and historians. Smith’s concentration on sensory perceptions in the decisive war of America’s history is no gimmick. But his selection of six moments in that war, all interesting in themselves, feels aleatory. He has not proved that the Civil War altered American senses. What Vicksburgers tasted, what flesh the *Hunley*’s packed crew pressed, what cannonades hurt Charlestonians’ ears, what Cornelia Hancock smelled, and so on, are not compelling evidence of any nationwide changes in perception, from faraway Boston to nearer by South Turkey Creek, Buncombe County, North Carolina. Mark Smith’s essays are, nonetheless, a discerning demonstration that sensory history belongs in the scholar’s array of approaches to a richly documented period. The contemporary sources and official documents he taps so astutely in this slim volume will appeal to and inform laypersons, Civil War buffs, and professional historians alike.

13. Smith eschews discussion of ultimate forms of touching in sex, instead referring his readers (as he does twenty-one times in the epilogue’s first twenty-five footnotes) to J.T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 1985).