If you want to write a popular work of history today consider writing about the Civil War. Americans have an enduring interest in our great national struggle. Patriotism, heroes, lost causes, bravery, suffering, sacrifice, a struggle for freedom, the defense of home. You name it; the Civil War has something for virtually every reader.

Goodheart takes compelling material and elevates it into art. His writing has a vibrancy to it, that coupled with the pace, both paints mental images that linger and carries the reader along with the participants as fateful decisions are made. You feel, in a real sense, that you are there in 1861 as history is being made. Read it and enjoy.

Goodheart’s narrative is a different kind of book about the Civil War than most. Historians usually betray their view about the causes of the war and the people who determined its outcome by their subject matter. If they focus on Lincoln then they are suggesting that Lincoln lies at the center of the story; they are arguing implicitly that great men shape history. If they focus on the South and slavery then they are arguing that the true impetus for war can be found in the seceding states and the South’s institutions.

Think about these questions as you work your way through it.

What is Goodheart’s focus? Is it on the North or the South? Is it on prominent leaders or lesser particpants? What is Goodheart suggesting about history by his choice of whom to focus on? What is his argument about the Civil War?

Prologue.

What is Goodheart’s thesis about the decision-makers in history? Who are they? Why do they act as they do? What are their motives? Assuming that he is correct, what room is left for prominent leaders on the stage of history? Is he being deterministic here or subtle and nuanced?

Who is Robert Anderson and why is he relevant to the coming of the Civil War according to Goodheart? What do you learn about Anderson as this chapter and the book unfolds? Why does Goodheart focus on the relocation of the federal garrison from Moultrie to Sumter? Is Anderson acting out of conservatism or radicalism? What is surprising about the federal government’s instructions to Anderson as he mans a post at ground zero for a possible war?

Goodheart refers repeatedly to 1861 as being a time of crisis and uncertainty; he also writes of it as a “calm, stasis.” Why does he feel he has to stress this so many times? Assuming that this is true what does this do for the significance of many of the men and women that he writes about and the events that he details? What has brought about this statis, this calm?

What is Goodheart’s thesis about where the nation stood in 1861?

Chapter One.

What is the significance of the title to this chapter? Is there more than one meaning to the title? Why the focus on Farnham and the Wide Awakes? This is a seemingly odd juxtaposition but he has a purpose here. What is it? What is Goodheart’s argument about the broad sweep of American history at this time? There is a generational aspect to Goodheart’s argument.

Goodheart has chosen his subject matter carefully. What is the connection between the election, the death of Farnham, and the move from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter? He brilliantly ties seeming unrelated events together.

Chapter Two.

Who are the old gentlemen referred to in the title of this chapter? Goodheart contrasts something in Chapter One that is undergoing profound and rapid change with something in this chapter that has remained unchanged. What is it in Chapter One that is changing so quickly? What is in Chapter Two that has remained the same?

Who is Judge Bibb and why is he relevant?

Who is John Crittenden and why is he relevant? How is Crittenden, a prominent Senator portrayed? As a powerful decision-maker shaping events or as oddly out of touch and out of step with unfolding events? If Crittenden is not at the center of unfolding events, who is?

Chapter Three.

What do you make of Goodheart’s decision to focus on an obscure college professor from Ohio in this chapter? Who is the professor and what becomes of him? What is the significance of choosing a man from Ohio? Why the focus on Ohio?

What does he embody? What does Darwin’s Origins of Species have to do with the coming of the Civil War?

Goodheart begins introducing us to Lincoln here three chapters into the book. This is a very calculated decision on his part. What does it say about his view of Lincoln’s relevance and the forces already unleashed before Lincoln even reaches the nation’s capitol? Keep an eye on Goodheart’s treatment of Lincoln. Is Lincoln central to the drama or a peripheral player?

Chapter Four.

By this point you should see that his chapter headings are double entendres. Who fires the shots in the dark?

Goodheart returns to Charleston Harbor at this point in his narrative. This is skillful writing to have introduced you to a tense situation, place it within a larger context, and now return to it.

Describe how Goodnight treats Lincoln and Lincoln’s surprising instructions to General Winfield Scott?

Chapter Five.

Why the focus on Elmer Ellsworth? Who is this man? What is the relevance of his death in Chapter Seven? Why is the memorial to him unfinished even at war’s end? What is the Young American movement? What is the significance of the Zouaves?

Chapter Six.

Why does Goodheart begin this chapter with the description of the Pony Express and the telegraph line? What is the relevance of discussing both St. Louis *and* California in the same chapter? This is unusual for him; he has grounded each previous chapter in a single place. Here he chooses two places and weaves two stories together? Why has he done this? Who is Jessie Fremont? Who is Thomas Starr King? Are they responsible for keeping California in the Union according to Goodheart?

Chapter Seven.

Goodheart uses a particular device exceptionally well here. It is a literary device called delaying the naming of the peg. The peg is the name of the person who really makes the story have particular meaning. He artfully delays naming the peg here for quite some time. Who is the peg? Why is this relevant? Doesn’t the delay have a particularly profound effect on the reader?

What is the significance of the unfinished Capitol? What does that have to do with 1861 and the coming of the Civil War? The title of the chapter refers to one crossing yet there are at least two that Goodheart is referring to in this chapter. What are they?

Chapter Eight.

Goodheart begins again brilliantly with a small vignette that sets the stage for this chapter. Why is the story about Hampton, Virginia relevant to this chapter? Who are Baker, Mallory, and Townsend and why are they relevant? Most histories simply state blandly that three slaves were allowed entry to Fort Monroe. What is the effect of naming them?

What do you make of Butler? Is he a likely hero? What is Butler’s argument?

How does Goodheart portray Lincoln here? Decisive and leading, radical and revolutionary or cautious and tentative?

What is the irony of Southerners burning down Hampton, Virginia?

Chapter Nine.

Why end the book with a chapter about Independence Day? Something is different about the way that Goodheart writes this chapter from those before it? How is it different? Is it tone? Material? What is it?

Why the focus on the comet? Why does he have the comet at the beginning shining brightly and then detail its passing from sight at the end of the chapter?

What is the thesis of this chapter? What are the skills that Goodheart thinks that Lincoln has that make Lincoln such an effective leader? According to Goodheart, what is Lincoln’s argument to the American people? If this is true and you assume that Lincoln understood what he was doing, then what do you make of his earlier apparent uncertainty and tentativeness?

Postscript

Why does Goodheart add a postscript? What is a postscript? His here is lengthy and goes into a fair amount of detail about the rest of the lives of the people we cross paths with in the book. What does one learn from the postscript about people, history, and times of decision?