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Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era (review)

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lives. Like the other historians who have studied domestic religion, such as Colleen McDannell, Stephan reminds us that the home as well as the church has served as a crucial locus of religious meaning.

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Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era. By Christian G. Samito. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009. Pp. 305. Cloth, \$39.95.)

In July 1865, Massachusetts congressman George S. Boutwell drew attention to the diverse sources of Union victory: “The war for freedom and the Union has been carried on by the whites and negroes born on this continent, by the Irish and the Germans, and indeed by representatives of every European race.” Boutwell turned this recognition into a call for postwar rights. “With this fresh experience,” Boutwell declared, “we ought to make it a part of the organic government that no State shall make any distinction in the enjoyment of the elective franchise on account of race or color” (218–19). Boutwell’s words were revolutionary. Before the war, the Supreme Court had deemed African Americans noncitizens. Nativist state legislatures had attempted to limit the rights of immigrants, especially Irish immigrants. But now, and based upon military service, American politicians were calling for political rights for these groups and the federal defense of those rights. This is the main theme of Christian G. Samito’s new book: the Civil War military service of African Americans and Irish Americans compelled a new vision of American citizenship that included former slaves and naturalized immigrants.

Samito traces the military, political, and social experiences of African American and Irish American men throughout the Civil War era. He begins with the 1850s to show a crisis of citizenship. Massive immigration and the ratcheting up of antislavery versus proslavery politics led to an unstable political moment during which the citizenship rights of African Americans and immigrant Americans were profoundly complicated. By the time of the Civil War, Lincoln’s attorney general Edward Bates could claim he found no definitive definition of citizenship in America’s short

history. In the midst of a civil war over who constituted the nation, the federal government knew not the answer.

During the war, Samito claims, Irish Americans and African Americans entered into this nebulous space and presented themselves as true American citizens. In the process of fighting for the Union and discussing their participation, these two groups made the case for full citizenship. Samito does a marvelous job looking at wartime experiences, courts-martial cases, conventions, and publications of Irish Americans and African Americans to determine how these groups pushed for, experienced, and eventually helped put into law a new and defined version of American citizenship. That citizenship was codified in the Fourteenth Amendment, which declares that all people “born or naturalized in the United States . . . are citizens.” Hence, former slaves and naturalized immigrants became recognized as citizens.

By focusing on the importance of citizenship, Samito offers an important addition to scholarship on the Civil War era. Of late, issues of citizenship, nationalism, and patriotism have fascinated scholars. Harry S. Stout locates the birth of an American civil religion in the Civil War in his *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (2006). Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary in her tremendous study *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (1999) focuses on how the Civil War began intense conversations about American nationalism—forcing new conversations about who comprised the nation. In his small but brilliant *Is Blood Thicker than Water?: Crises of Nationalism in the Modern World* (1999) James McPherson examines two conflicting approaches to citizenship in the Civil War era: ethnic nationalism, which premised citizenship upon racial or ethnic distinctions, and civic nationalism, which premised citizenship on adherence to specific political beliefs. *My Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865–1898* (2005) followed McPherson and looks at the role of religious ideas and leaders in American nationalism and citizenship in the era. I suggest that the Civil War fractured the “white republic” of the antebellum period and opened up the possibilities of new national discussions. While all of this scholarship pays attention to African Americans, very little of it accounts for Irish American experiences. My book on religion and its place in American nationalism neglects Irish Americans and Catholicism almost completely, an oversight I wish I could correct now after reading Samito’s book.

Samito also speaks to the literature on whiteness and Irish American studies. Most often, these works focus on the tensions between Irish Americans and African Americans. Noel Ignatiev, David Roediger, and Matthew Frye Jacobson, for instance, see Irish American claims to whiteness—and hence American citizenship—as built upon racist posturing

against African Americans. The historical focus on the 1863 draft riots, as well, centers on Irish American animosity toward African Americans. But Samito shows a number of confluences and interactions among African Americans and Irish Americans. Samito demonstrates that at times Irish Americans and African Americans expressed concern for one another's plights. Samito is never blind to tensions between these groups, although he may downplay them in an effort to show what the two groups shared.

There is one facet of citizenship, however, that Samito neglects, and this arena is too important to ignore. Gender plays no role in his study, even though issues of gender are crucial to the secondary literature of the time period and to those who lived through it. When feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton opposed the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and when social reformers like Frances Willard defended women's rights with anti-immigrant claims, they tapped into the gender bias of this new American citizenship. If military service was a prerequisite for establishing new parameters of citizenship, then women—whether African American, immigrant American, or native—were put in a bad position. Moreover, the rhetoric of citizenship was laced with masculine language, such as Frederick Douglass's claim that African Americans would achieve their manhood by taking up arms. Scholarship by Nina Silber and Louise Newman could have been included to point out the gendered bases of the citizenship Samito finds constructed.

Overall, this is an outstanding book. It offers a terrific bottom-up approach to citizenship debates in the Civil War era and demonstrates the powerful role played by Irish American and African American men in creating new forms of American citizenship and nationalism in the mid-nineteenth century. It would be extremely useful in any course on the Civil War.

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U. S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth. By Joan Waugh.
(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Pp. 384.
Cloth, \$30.00.)

Joan Waugh has written precisely the kind of book historians, especially Civil War historians, need right now. Not strictly a biography of