

Peissel discovered in his reading that the source of the Mekong River had never been established. (The French explorer Dutreuil de Rhins, leader of an 1894 expedition up the Mekong, was shot to death by Tibetan tribesmen in a dispute over stolen horses before reaching the source.) Mindful that success would bring little glory or money, and that an intransigent Chinese bureaucracy would make securing travel permits anything but easy, he was spurred on by his respect both for the Mekong (Asia's third-longest river, originating in Tibet, crossing China, India, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, and ending at a delta in Vietnam) and for Tibet's ecological primacy as the river-head of Asia, the source of the Yellow, Yangtze, Salween, Mekong, Bramaputra, Irawaddy, and Ganges rivers.

The author is painfully witty in describing the hell of innumerable days in a Land Rover, referring to himself as "strictly what you might call a foot and horse man" who is trapped with a driver, two companions, and a humorless and unenthusiastic Chinese guide. At an outpost, they barter for porters and horses. Then, after a 15-day journey, they reach the object of their quest, the headwaters of the great Mekong—which prove to be not a stupendous glacier, like the source of the Ganges, but a mere trickle from a patch of red soil. "We had discovered the source of the Mekong, an act as banal as it proved to be magical. There was little or nothing to see. The true importance of our discovery was all in the mind, for we had reached one of those rare sacred places where myth and reality meet."

Crossing the vast Tibetan highlands back toward civilization, where he confronts the ugly reality of the Chinese military occupation (in place since 1950), Peissel ruminates on whether technology has divided man from nature and robbed us of willpower, curiosity, and wonder. His mission has become an exploration of the conflict between the civilized and the nomadic: "There is nothing organized society fears more than the intrusion of smart, carefree, gutsy, horseback-riding 'barbarians'." Once more Peissel has proved that even in the age of the satellite and the Internet, there are yet many things about our planet that remain unknown.

—Maura Moynihan

*CONFEDERATES IN THE ATTIC:
Dispatches from the
Unfinished Civil War.*

By Tony Horwitz. Pantheon.
399 pages. \$27

What strange historical passions could induce a gainfully employed and coherent-sounding young waiter to spend his weekends and much of his income pursuing a "hardcore" experience of the Civil War, a quest that involves sleeping in battlefield ditches, eating authentically wormy period grub, and studying old photos to perfect his imitation of a bloated Confederate corpse? Play-acting aside, what still-vivid historical memories provoked a black teenager to shoot and kill Michael Westerman, a white father of newborn twins in Guthrie, Kentucky, whose pickup truck displayed the Confederate flag?

The "unfinished Civil War" described by journalist Tony Horwitz runs the gamut from hobbyist fervor to deadly violence, across a vast middle stretch of more familiar manifestations of historical awareness—books, movies, tourist reconstructions, associations of Confederate veterans' sons and daughters, debates over the teaching of history and the symbols of the Confederacy. Horwitz, a long-time *Wall Street Journal* foreign correspondent and author of two previous books, returned from nine years abroad to find his country plunged into the rediscovery of a war that had fascinated him as a child. Having missed such watershed events as the Ken Burns documentary, the movies *Glory* and *Gettysburg*, and the fight over whether to build a Disney theme park near Manassas battlefield in Virginia, he hit the road, seeking to find out what stokes this continuing hunger to revisit a war that ended 133 years ago.

Horwitz's book offers a lively map of the "continuing war's" various campaigns, but their meaning remains elusive. He finds, not surprisingly, that for many adherents the Civil War obsession spills beyond the standard motives of the amateur historian—regional pride, genealogy, escapism—into wider, still-raging issues of civil rights and race. Some of the people he talks to are clearly in full flight from modernity: the Klan members, the sweet lady in North Carolina who tells Horwitz she has enrolled her cat in the first chapter of *Cats of the Confederacy*. Others, it is clear, are simply

engaging in their version of good clean fun by dressing as Civil War soldiers and taking part in battlefield “re-enactments.”

Bouncing from the contested history of the Confederate prison camp at Andersonville, Georgia, to the debate over whether Richmond, Virginia, will raise a statue to the black tennis player Arthur Ashe, Horwitz at times seems a bit lost in the implications of a topic that, followed to its limits, would touch most of the major preoccupations and battlefields of contemporary American culture. Mostly, though, he steers a wobbly but illuminating course between high seriousness and high camp, faithfully reflecting the peculiarly American way of constructing a shared history.

—Amy E. Schwartz

CLASS STRUGGLE:
*What's Wrong (and Right) with
America's Best Public High Schools.*

By Jay Mathews. Random House.
304 pp. \$24.50

Venturing inside America's elite public high schools, Mathews finds fabulous teachers, students with heart-stopping talents, and parents willing to bear any burden in exchange for Ivy League admission letters for their children. He also discovers a darker side to these schools: the middling students—those who are bright but not brilliant, as well as those with learning disabilities or language problems—tend to receive mediocre educations.

The fault lies less with teachers and administrators, Mathews contends, than with the overly zealous parents of the superior students. A superb education for their own children is not enough; the parents also insist that the schools set their offspring apart from the masses. So when administrators try to expand advanced-placement classes or to mix the gifted with the average, these parents

balk. And they usually prevail. Mathews, an education reporter at the *Washington Post*, reveals that elite public schools are structured, to an alarming degree, by pressure for even more elitism.

Class Struggle is principally set at suburban New York's Mamaroneck High School (which Mathews studied for three years), with occasional vignettes from elsewhere. With a journalist's wiles, the author extracts self-revealing comments from students, parents, principals, and others. We eavesdrop on the teachers who stealthily try to soften the edges of a relentless tracking system, the parents who spar to retain the privileges and prerogatives of their gifted children, the school board member who crafts a Machiavellian plot to save an excellent but ornery physics teacher. In a field plagued by abstraction and jargon, Mathews stresses character and conflict with a novelist's sure touch. His engaging, economical book shows how overweening parental ambition perverts even the best public schools.

—Harriet Tyson

TWILIGHT ON THE LINE:
*Underworlds and Politics at the
U.S.-Mexico Border.*

By Sebastian Rotella. Norton.
320 pp. \$25

A book blurbed by Bruce Springsteen (“Rotella's passionate reporting on the street kids of San Diego led me to write ‘Balboa Park’”) may not immediately inspire scholarly confidence. Is this yet another pop dramatization of a complicated policy issue? The fear is unfounded. Rotella, who covered the U.S.-Mexico border for the *Los Angeles Times* from 1991 to 1996, reveals the violence and tragedy unfolding in a region at once very close and very far away. Some of the events he recounts have made headlines. But most Americans, including most elites, have yet to come to grips with them. This evenhanded book will help.

Rotella begins by portraying the dangers endured by the hundreds of thousands of illegal aliens who continue to stream into the United States. Not least among the perils is mistreatment at the hands of the criminal rings that smuggle people across the border. As Rotella points out, long-thriving smuggling rings have become even more profitable recently, thanks to American efforts to stem

