

### Southern Histories: Public, Personal, and Sacred

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#### Recommended Citation

Foster, Gaines M. (2004) "Southern Histories: Public, Personal, and Sacred," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss2/21>

## Review

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Spring 2004

**Goldfield, David** *Southern Histories: Public, Personal, and Sacred*. University of Georgia Press, \$24.95 ISBN 820325619

Transforming past and present:

The historian's role in shaping the New South

The southern community forged after the Civil War, argues historian David Goldfield in **Southern Histories**, has been shaken to its foundation by the civil rights movement and, more recently, an invasion of secularism brought by new migrants to the South and changes mandated by the Supreme Court, such as an end to state-sponsored prayer in schools. That post-Civil War southern community, Goldfield maintains, rested in the white South's obsession with the past, especially the myths of the pristine Old South, the glorious Lost Cause, and the trial of Reconstruction that ended ultimately in Redemption. These myths denied the evils of slavery or its role in the South's decision to secede even as they portrayed the region as the victim of northern vengeance after the war. The white South's account of its history thereby served to create both geographical and racial boundaries; in other words, it defined the South as distinct from the North and as white. The white South's account of the war, Goldfield adds, also stressed that the Lord allowed the Confederacy's defeat because God had greater plans for the South in the future, which led to a close connection between history, southern culture, and a dominant conservative evangelical Protestantism resistant to change. History and religion, in Goldfield's view, became central to the persistence of a distinctive South. Readers intrigued by such a portrait of the region and especially those interested in the way in which the Civil War shaped southern culture will be better served by reading Goldfield's earlier book, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, where the roots of southern identity in history and religion are more fully developed, than **Southern Histories**, a short book of only three chapters that originated as a series of lectures at Georgia Southern University. **Southern Histories**, however, has more to say about the possibilities

of changing that culture and the historian's role in doing so.

Goldfield, who teaches at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, begins **Southern Histories** with an account of an incident in which a group of Sons of Confederate Veterans attacked the historical interpretations of his earlier book, opposition that certainly supported his contention that the South still fought the Civil War. He then goes on to argue that the views of his neo-Confederate opponents are widespread in the South. Widespread may not mean a majority, but if it does Goldfield's comments are not fully affirmed in a recent poll by John Sheldon Reed, which found southern interest in the Confederacy declining. A slim majority of southerners even admitted that slavery had been the cause of the Civil War. But as Goldfield stresses in **Southern Histories**, more it seems than in the earlier book, the current confrontation over Confederate symbols is as much about the present as the past, and the South stands poised to rethink its history. Goldfield shows how African Americans in the region have always had a contrasting view of the Civil War and rightly argues that many of the current controversies over Confederate symbolism reflect the new power they have, in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, to promote their own vision of the past and future. If black and white southerners seem to be still fighting the Civil War with each other as enemies on some issues, Goldfield concludes, . . . a reconciliation may be at hand. Goldfield admirably wants to promote that reconciliation, in part by helping develop a new interpretation of the South's history. We should, he urges, still remember and commemorate the Confederacy, whether in a state flag in appropriate historical context, such as Georgia's new flag, or in a public monument, but at the same time southerners must come to see the Civil War as a tragedy.

Goldfield not only calls for a new vision of the southern past but a new role for religion in the region. What needs to occur in the South, he argues, is a broad-based attempt to disconnect southern evangelical Protestantism from its culture--the culture that emerged following the Civil War. His call for a new southern religious ethos follows a discussion of how the South had an environment where the civic and the spiritual were indistinguishable and where politics and religion had blended . . . long before the rise of the religious right. Goldfield attributes the close relationship between religion and culture to the aftermath of the Civil War, but the South's public religion has more complex origins. Many southern Protestants are steeped in a pentecostal or fundamentalist faith with roots not in the South's response to defeat but in theologies developed decades after Appomattox and outside of the South. And many southern blacks,

who have never accepted the white South's view of the Civil War, hold to similar religious beliefs and support calls for prayer in the schools and other causes dear to the hearts of white conservative evangelicals.

Having called in one chapter for a new vision of southern history and in a second for a new place for religion in southern society, Goldfield in his final chapter defends the historians' role in making the past intelligible for our neighbors and, in the process liberating the South from the burdens of that past without extinguishing the sense of history that binds all of us together. He then tells of his own efforts as an expert witness, both in congressional redistricting cases and the sentencing phase of death penalty trials, and as a consultant to the government in defining environmental policy. In all three types of work, Goldfield offered an understanding of the historical context in order to help overcome the continuing legacy of the South's racial past. Goldfield's efforts in behalf of these causes tangentially contributes to the redefinition of the South's sense of its past he calls for in his opening essay, but his most important contribution to the public debate over southern history comes in *Still Fighting the Civil War* and **Southern Histories**. In these books as well as his service as an expert witness and consultant, Goldfield provides a model of how historians can use their craft to help solve problems and . . . to make our world a little better place.

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