

The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture

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Review

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Fahs, Alice, Editor and Waugh, Joan, Editor. *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*. The University of North Carolina Press, \$59.95, \$19.95 ISBN 0807829072 hardcover, 0807855723 softcover

Exhuming emancipation

A scholarly act of reparation

This excellent and provocative collection of essays about the enduringly turbulent, dynamic, bitterly contested struggles to own and operate culturally prized memories of the Civil War is indicative of a steady stream of often very fine scholarship on the history of memories of the war and its enduring legacies. Readers are no doubt familiar with Tony Horwitz's popular *Confederates in the Attic*, which brought the issue of contested memories of the war to a wide public. Without moving from my office chair I spot Carol Reardon's *Pickett's Charge in History & Memory*, Robert Bonner's *Colors & Blood: Flag Passions of the Confederate South*, a collection of David W. Blight's essays, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War*, Merrill D. Peterson's *The Legend Revisited: John Brown*, C. Wyatt Evans' *The Legend of John Wilkes Booth: Myth, Memory, & a Mummy*, Jim Weeks' *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and an American Shrine*, Margaret Creighton's forthcoming *The Colors of Courage: Gettysburg's Hidden History*, a collection of essays edited by J. Michl Martinez, William D. Richardson, and Ron McNinch-Su, *Confederate Symbols in the Contemporary South*, David Goldfield's *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History*, another edited collection by Martin H. Blatt, Thomas J. Brown, and Donald Yacovone, *Hope & Glory: Essays on the Legacy of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment*, and Edward L. Ayers' *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America 1859-1863*, winner of the Bancroft Prize. (I know, Ayers' book is really about the war years and some would argue belongs on the Civil War history and not memory bookshelf, but one of the striking features of this magnificent accomplishment is

how Ayers brings readers into the struggle of these communities to make sense in their daily lives and yes, in their memories, both personal and cultural, of the shattering events unfolding beneath their feet.) For some time now there have been important analyses of the formation and operation of Lost Cause ideology, and no list, no matter how quirky, could fail to mention David W. Blight's immensely influential *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*.

Indeed, one measure of the importance of Blight's book is its looming presence in nearly all the essays in **The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture**. Many of the authors use his mapping of Lost Cause, reconciliationist and emancipationist memories. Many of these case studies support what Blight and others have argued, that very quickly after the war, and despite the often moving and compelling cries of protest from African Americans in particular, the emancipationist legacy was brushed aside for more digestible narratives of martial valor and white supremacy. While unsaid, many of these essays, in fact many of the recent explorations of the histories of Civil War memories, are part of the process of excavating and restoring to public prominence this emancipationist narrative. Consider it a scholarly act of reparation.

The term memories is perhaps awkward to use in book titles, but the plural is clearly the appropriate word. I am neither being fussy nor critical of titles in pointing out that, given the rich essays Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh have edited, the title of the book does not reveal the struggles over the construction and dissemination of these memories, struggles taking place, the editors write, from public monuments to parades to soldiers' memoirs to political campaigns to textbook publishing to children's literature.

Struggles are made up of hard work, and readers will no doubt be impressed by the hard work that goes into the making of usable memories. Joan Waugh's essay on the writing, message, and impact of U.S. Grant's memoirs takes us into the embryonic years of the formation of Civil War memories. She reminds us that battlefield reports, Grant's report to Congress, the Official Records of the war, the Century Series, were all among the building blocks of one set of memories, and yet Grant's strong and articulate convictions about the war did not, finally, receive the friendly reception that awaited the Southern shapers of memory in these embryonic times: Robert E. Lee and Jubal Early, to be followed by Douglas Southall Freeman, all of whom are the subject of Gary Gallagher's essay. In addition to his critical comments about the development of Lost Cause ideology, Gallagher points out that some of the arguments--the stature of Robert

E. Lee during the war, the conviction the North enjoyed significant advantages in men and material, for example--were, as he writes, grounded in wartime fact.

These struggles also took place over children's and college textbook wars. Readers will appreciate the hard work of the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the United Confederate Veterans, in particular the work of the indefatigable historian general of the UDC, Mildred L. Rutherford. Alice Fahs writes perceptively about the Civil War in children's literature, observing that one major theme of boys' books published during the war was the necessity of redefining the individual's relationship to both family and nation. Fairly predictably, she also observes that fiction denied blacks agency in the war's events [and] reinterpreted slavery as a positive good under the right circumstances.

Blacks certainly had agency in the creation of Decoration Day, argues David Blight, for in such collective public performances blacks in Charleston proclaimed their freedom and converted destruction into new life. Soon, however, the reconciliationist impulse consigned such ritual memory to secondary status, as, Blight argues, those who remembered the war as the rebirth of the republic in the name of racial equality would continue to do battle with the growing number who would remember it as the nation's test of manhood and the South's struggle to sustain white supremacy. Jon Weiner focuses on a contemporary ritual, the Civil War Centennial, and situates it in the volatile years of the Civil Rights movement and the Cold War. The centennial years, Weiner argues, provided occasion for both a restatement of states' rights ideology and a reminder of the failed promise of the emancipationist legacy (for example, when Martin Luther King, Jr., in vain asked President Kennedy to declare a second Emancipation Proclamation). Instead, writes Weiner, Kennedy gave permission to the FBI to wiretap King, as suggested by J. Edgar Hoover.

A smart essay by Thomas Brown takes readers into the complex history of attempts to monumentalize John C. Calhoun in Charleston, South Carolina. More clearly than the statues of Confederate soldiers, Brown writes, the Calhoun monument has served as a reminder of the ideas at stake in the sectional conflict and particularly the issues of race and slavery at the heart of the Civil War. And LeeAnn Whites writes about a more contemporary Confederate monument controversy on the University of Missouri campus.

Of course, struggles took place in the political arena as well. J. Matthew Gallman writes about the fascinating life of popular orator Anna Dickinson and her efforts to impact the election of 1872 through her reshaping of memories of the war in fierce criticism of Grant and the Republicans. Patrick J. Kelly writes about William McKinley's effective use of memories of the secession crisis of 1861 to construct a Civil War memory that warned against sectional division and, transcending race as the central problem' of wartime remembrance, allowed the Republican party to brand political protest against America's growing social and economic inequalities as unpatriotic threats to national unity.

In his brief but perceptive epilogue, Stuart McConnell observes that for Civil War remembrance in the Gilded Age, actions in the political sphere regularly trumped cultural productions. In recent times, he argues, historical memory would be centered on Mount Vernon, with other memorials forms arrayed in the foothills before it. I certainly agree that the comforts of heritage production can transform the Civil War--so easily amenable to what one former Virginia governor characterized as a golden mist of American valor--into little more than insipid consumer entertainment. I do not, however, agree with his contention that memory of the war is no longer viewed as it was in the 19th century, a political weapon. It seems to me that memories of the war are deeply braided with contemporary issues of racial politics, evocative symbols of regional identity, historic preservation, and intimate issues of honor and sacrifice, more compelling in some areas of the nation than others. These case studies offer readers a good introduction to the many ways Civil War memories are shaped, transformed, and put to diverse use.

Edward T. Linenthal is the author of Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields, and The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory.