

### Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation

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## Review

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**Neff, John R.** *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation*. \$34.95, hardcover ISBN 700613668

Secession in the Cemetery

Crafting the Cause Victorious

Scholars of American history are looking into almost every aspect of civil war memory. Few would question the significance of the bloody conflict in the history of the South, shaping white southern identity even into contemporary times with the celebration of the Lost Cause. Scholars such as David Blight have examined what became of the emancipationist vision of the conflict while, most recently, Edward Blum has given us a much needed examination of how religion influenced the northern memory of the war.

Surprisingly, these studies have not closely examined what would have been, for 19th century Americans, the most brutally obvious aspect of civil war memory: the deaths of almost 630,000 men. The graveyard, not the monument or the memorial association, represented the reality of the war's aftermath for most Americans. Recently, William Blair's excellent study *Cities of the Dead* examined how these cemeteries became sites of continuing sectional discord and symbolic struggle. Now John R. Neff has given us a much broader study about the meaning of death and its relationship to American nationalism in **Honoring the Civil War Dead**.

Neff makes several important contributions to the study of postbellum memory. First, he insists that following the war, the North was as active as the South in mythmaking. Northerners, he notes, had a very different symbolic task from their southern counterparts but one no less significant in its cultural import. The South had to mythologize the meaning of their defeat but the North had to create a mythology surrounding the meaning of its victory. Throughout the work, the author asks us to rethink some of our assumptions about the nature of war's

outcome in postbellum America. In the decades following the surrender of the Confederate armies, the Union, Neff writes, had not been successfully sundered, but Reconstruction proved that it was not entirely whole. (8). Neff uses the phrase the Cause Victorious to describe the efforts by the North to imagine the meaning and reality of sectional reconciliation, a new American nationalism born from the great crisis of American nationalism in the 1860s.

The heart of Neff's argument focuses on the creation of the National Cemetery system, writing that it represents the greatest single expression on the part of the federal government about the war and its importance to the national existence (134). He notes that the sheer number of the dead, combined with how the new technology of photography and simply the nearness of battlefield to home front, brought death to America's backdoor. In an especially intriguing argument interwoven throughout the work, Neff shows that sectional animosity continued in the public discourse of what would become of the dead. Stories circulated freely in the North that southerners had played Achilles to the Union's many Hectors buried on southern battlefields, mistreating and dishonoring the remains of war dead. Members of the GAR and northern shapers of public opinion protested the burial of Confederate dead with the Union dead in the National Cemetery system. Neff notes that while some National Cemeteries had Confederate sections, not until 1997 would Confederate remains be buried with military honors in a National Cemetery (and in fact, these were unknown remains so they may well have been Union dead).

Neff makes some important points regarding the role played by the African-American military dead in relation to the construction of the new nationalism. Ironically their remains, like those of the Confederates, had a problematic relationship to the national narrative the North sought to tell. The author notes that often African-American soldiers tended to be placed in segregated plots, located in the more undesirable area of the proposed cemetery grounds (190). Neff rightly sees this in line with the tendency of northern civil war memory to structure a narrative that emphasized both the triumph of the Union and the end of slavery while leaving unasked the question of civil rights for the freedpeople.

Scholars of the Lost Cause, and their name is legion these days, will value Neff's intriguing discussion of how the North appropriated certain aspects of Lost Cause mythology. Even the Lost Cause narrative surrounding Robert E. Lee, a narrative that sometimes emphasized his conciliatory attitude toward his

enemies, could be interwoven into the new nationalist mythology. The exaltation of Lee could be read by northerners, Neff contends, as the story of a southern man who had accepted the northern myth of American Union. (161). This notion, that northerners and southerners essentially talked past one another in their creation of the meaning of America's most cataclysmic war, offers an idea all scholars of the era should ponder further.

A few points made by Neff, especially with regard to the Lost Cause, deserve some critique. For example, Neff, like many scholars, suggests that the Lost Cause did not reach maturity until the 1890s and notes that, in the early years of the postbellum era, the Lost Cause was expressed, of necessity, in a covert language (144). In truth, an examination of the Lost Cause in connection with the politics of Reconstruction shows that it had anything but a covert existence in these years. To be fair to Neff, his point seems to be that the Lost Cause found only tentative expression in the first years of the peace while the northern mythology of the war, in his argument, crystallized immediately on Lincoln's death and grew steadily in strength and coherence from that point onward. (145). Neff's approach, his view of the Lost Cause growing primarily in relation to the Cause Victorious, may have prevented him from giving the Lost Cause movement a full interpretation on its own terms.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the subject matter, Neff did not choose to deal with the role played by religious faith in the process of creating the myth of the Cause Victorious. We do hear from a number of northern ministers on subjects ranging from the death of the common soldier to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Neff tends to suggest, however, that the needs of civic nationalism, rather than the construction of a theological meaning, informed the sermons they preached and the symbols they employed. It is surprising in this context that Neff did not choose to fully explore the question of civil religion in relation to the northern memory of the civil war, an intervention that would have proved interesting given discussions about that contested concept in Lost Cause scholarship. Religion should have played a larger role in this work more generally given that work by scholars such as Gardner Shattuck, Daniel Stowall and, most recently, Edward Blum, suggests that the theological import of Union victory played a much larger role than Neff assigns it.

These issues do not in any way invalidate the value of Neff's work. The book contributes much to our growing understanding of the national, rather than simply sectional, implications of civil war memory and is highly recommended.

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