

Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder

Francis MacDonnell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

MacDonnell, Francis (2013) "Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.1.16

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss1/15>

Review

MacDonnell, Francis

Winter 2013

Levin, Kevin M. *Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder*. University of Press of Kentucky, \$35.00 ISBN ISBN 978-0-8131-3610-3

Fighting the Battle of Memory

Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder by Kevin Levin offers a valuable addition to the growing body of scholarship on the American Civil War and popular memory. Levin shows how, for much of the post-war period, the story of the battle of the Crater was explained in terms of the courage of the white combatants and their honor in fighting for what they believed in. Minimizing and ignoring the role of black troops at the Crater made it possible to evade divisive issues arising from slavery and racism. While acknowledging a debt to David Blight's *Race and Reunion*, Levin's succinct and thought-provoking book makes its own contributions to our understanding of the Civil War's place in the public consciousness.

Although focused on a single battle and its resonance over time, the book is far from narrow. Topics addressed include: the emergence of the Lost Cause ideology; the battle between reformers and conservatives in Reconstruction Virginia; the growth of Veterans Organizations in the post-Civil War era; the cultural import of Civil War battle re-enactments; the creation of the Petersburg National Military Park; the post-World War II rise of family vacations to Civil War battlefields; the interaction between Civil War Centennial celebrations and the Civil Rights movement; and the contemporary debate surrounding the interpretation of the American Civil War. His range of sources is similarly replete, including art works, films, old battlefield maps, programs from reunions and re-enactments, and numerous manuscript collections.

The battle of the Crater took place on July 30, 1864. The engagement proved a disaster for the North and was one of the South's notable victories in the last year of the conflict. It was also the site of a massacre of black troops.

Union forces planned to dig a mine under Confederate forces, detonate an explosion, and then advance through the gap in the enemy lines to take Petersburg. After the shock of the initial blast, Union troops failed to push ahead with sufficient speed, fell into a deadly enfilading fire, and eventually succumbed to a counterattack by Virginia General William Mahone.

For the Confederacy, the use of black soldiers at the Crater marked an immoral escalation in the war. Southern soldiers wrote letters home to loved ones that described in grim detail the brutal vengeance they directed against African American troops, including the murder of non-resisting soldiers and prisoners of war. A Mississippi Confederate wrote: "Most of the Negroes were killed after the battle. Some was killed after they were taken to the rear" (28). Blacks suffered 41% of the casualties even though accounting for only 21% of the Union combatants (19). Levin notes that for southern whites, black men in uniform marked a "racial order turned upside down" and constituted "a direct threat to their own communities and families" (29).

In an irony of history, William Mahone, the "Hero of the Crater," emerged in the postwar era as the creator of an inter-racial coalition that challenged "white supremacy, black subordination, and an agrarian economy . . ." (68). Mahone managed to control the state legislature from 1879-1883, and he pushed ahead with an ambitious program that readjusted the state debt downward in order to free up money for public schools. His program cut taxes on the poor, ended the poll tax, and opened up patronage to black Virginians. For state conservatives, Mahone posed a deadly threat to the existing political and social hierarchy because of his insider status and war hero credentials. Levin offers a masterful account of the failed attempt by Jubal Early and other conservatives to "swiftboat" Mahone as a skulker, who didn't deserve credit for the victory at the Crater, and who had betrayed his old soldiers by reapportioning government jobs from deserving veterans to blacks. Mahone survived the attacks in part because he had established close ties to his veterans, using reunions to build a political base. When their old general's reputation was besmirched, his men rushed to his defense. Even though it was displaced in 1883, Mahone's machine remained a powerful force in the state throughout the rest of the 1880s.

A recurring theme in Levin's book is the interaction between hard financial realities and historic preservation. Immediately following the war, the farmer who owned the land where the battle took place set up a small museum and a Crater Saloon charging a quarter per guest. The battlefield became a site for

veterans to meet and celebrate their participation in the Civil War and a stop for curious civilians eager to lay eyes on the big hole caused by the mine blast. In 1903 a major re-enactment was staged with 20,000 observers and 50,000 spectators witnessed a sham version of the battle in 1937 (68, 101). In 1918 the land at the Crater site was purchased by a group of investors who built a golf course on the site of much of the old battlefield. With understated humor Levin notes the unconvincing efforts of the gold course president to reassure preservationists that "green fairways and tees bearing the names of its [the Battle of the Crater's] heroes" were a "beautiful shrine to the boys of the Blue and Gray who there made the supreme sacrifice" (100). In 1936, the federal government bought the land when the gold course closed and added it to the grounds of the already established Petersburg National Military Park. Levin observes that financial pressures to keep the Park's largely white visitors happy with what they heard worked to keep controversial topics involving race out of the Park's narrative of the battle in its early years.

During the 1950s, planners for the Civil War Centennial intended to use the anniversary to celebrate the consensus view of the Civil War as a story about the "common bonds of bravery and patriotism" that animated both sides (113). However, the Civil Rights Movement intervened and made it impossible to ignore the role of race in the conflict. In 1960, African Americans in Petersburg, engaged in civil disobedience to protest the city's "whites only" segregation laws in the public library (formerly the home of William Mahone.) Levin notes that by 1964 a prominent public celebration of the Crater "would have invited challenges to the way public memory of the battle had been used so effectively to reinforce white political control of the state" (122). As a result, the Petersburg Civil War Centennial Commission kept commemorative celebrations to a bare minimum in order to protect the "preferred interpretation" (122).

From the 1970s onward Petersburg Battlefield Park sought to deepen its coverage of the part played by black soldiers at the Crater. The Park added historical markers on the topic, hired more African American employees, reached out to the black community in Petersburg, and made clear to Park visitors the depth of Confederate bitterness toward the United States Colored Troops. The new trend expressed greater comfort in showing multiple perspectives of historical actors in the battle and in owning up to the substantial divisions that existed within and between the combatants.

Levin does not conclude with Whiggish exultation that history will inevitably triumph over heritage. He observes that in 2010, Virginia Governor Robert McDonnell's reestablishment of Confederate heritage month aroused statewide and national outrage for failing to reference the role of slavery in the Civil War. McDonnell beat a rapid retreat, apologizing for his omission. On the one hand, this about-face underscored the impossibility for a twenty-first century Virginia politician to elide the role of race in the war's origins. On the other hand, Levin suggests the desire to avoid making value judgments about the war seems to have continued. In 2009 President Barack Obama turned down a petition to halt the sending of a wreath from the White House to the Confederate memorial in Arlington Cemetery. As a compromise, he sent two wreaths, one to the Confederate Memorial and the other to the African American Civil War Memorial in the District of Columbia. Levin points out the enduring power of an anodyne narrative of the Civil War that interprets our bloodiest war largely in terms of shared values. He warns that such an approach not only distorts history, but also makes it impossible to have an honest discussion about racial questions in our own day.

Francis MacDonnell is Professor of History at Southern Virginia University. His writing on the Civil War in memory includes "Reconstruction in the Wake of Vietnam: The Pardoning of Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis," Civil War History (June 1994), 119-33. and "The Confederate Spin on Winfield Scott and George Thomas," Civil War History (December 1998), 255-66. He is also the author of Insidious Foes: the Axis Fifth Column and the American Home Front, 1938-1942 (Oxford University Press, 1995). Francis.macdonnell@svu.edu