

Demon of the Lost Cause: Sherman and Civil War History

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Review

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Moody, Wesley *Demon of the Lost Cause: Sherman and Civil War History*.
University of Missouri Press, \$30.00 ISBN 978-0-8262-1945-9

Understanding the Origins of a Controversial Sherman

This is not just a book about the Lost Cause; this is a book about the continuing legacy of the Lost Cause. This is a story of how myth becomes history and that history then becomes accepted by the general public and is eventually sometimes acknowledged and repeated by the scholarly community. According to the author, William T. Sherman was not always hated in the South nor was he always heralded in the North. He went from being considered a southern sympathizer at the end of the war to the man who became a symbol of modern war in the twentieth century, to, in many twenty-first century minds, the general who had been responsible for unwarranted brutality on innocent civilians.

Wesley Moody, a professor of history at Florida State College in Jacksonville, begins his account of Sherman's evolution in historical thought with a story about how some southerners perceive the general in today's society. No matter what one thinks of Sherman, he is best known for his march across Georgia in 1864. Over the years, the historical myths about the devastation left between Atlanta and Savannah have flourished, so that in his introduction Moody writes: "On a recent visit to Eatonton, Georgia, I visited the Uncle Remus Museum and was regaled with stories of how Sherman had destroyed every home in the town" as he marched toward the sea. "I then took a self-guided tour of Eatonton's beautiful antebellum homes," he adds (1).

There are nine chapters and after the first two (which cover Sherman's prewar and wartime activities), each individual chapter reads like an article that could stand alone. Chapter three, "The Commanding General versus the North," is an analysis of Sherman's first postwar battle: that of how his reputation would

be seen among Union veterans and among those politicians who were afraid that the general might use his wartime exploits to win political office. The main controversy, at least in the North, surrounded the importance of the March to the Sea, along with who should be given credit for devising the strategy. Southerners, on the other hand, recalled the general favorably, citing the generous surrender terms he initially offered Joseph E. Johnston in North Carolina, his feuds with other Union generals, and his pro-southern racial views of African Americans.

According to Moody, it was the first generation of postwar writers who turned Sherman into a monster. In chapter four, "The War of the Memoirs," Sherman became more popular in the North while losing credibility in the South. The various self-serving postwar memoirs written by important figures North and South are not new to readers of the Civil War and Moody does not offer anything particularly startling. Instead he uses this chapter as a means to show the evolution of Sherman's reputation. Chapter five, "Sherman's Last Years," likewise does not offer anything new but points out that Sherman spent his final years angering Southerners at a time that they were constructing the myth of the Lost Cause. So in chapter six, "Sherman versus the Lost Cause," Moody shows how the general became a villain to those Southerners who rewrote history to glorify the South. After his death, Sherman was a target of those who renamed the conflict the "War Between the States." Moody maintains that Sherman was the "biggest victim of Lost Cause mythology" (p. 108). He concludes that "Lost Cause historians have shaped how this country views its Civil War" (p. 116), and in the pages of the *Confederate Veteran*, the writings of the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of the Confederacy, the evil Sherman emerged. On the other hand, in chapter seven, "Embracing the Lost Cause," Moody believes that Sherman benefitted from the publicity. Because of his role in the March to the Sea, he will never fade into history, and he became one of the three men who won the war (Lincoln, Grant, and Sherman). And whether correct or not, he became the symbol of modern war.

Chapter eight, "Sherman in Film" is simply an account of his influence on Hollywood, if not his actual depiction in the movies. The author looks at his influence on *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Gone With the Wind* (1939), and *How the West Was Won* (1962), pointing out that the movie industry was the culprit when introducing the "Lost Cause version of Sherman in popular culture" (p. 131).

The weakest chapter is the final one, "Sherman and the Modern Historians." Moody starts by looking at how early British writers saw Sherman, concluding that military historians like Basil Henry Liddell Hart (1895-1970) set the tone for later writers. Moody does not make it clear that he is laying the foundation for an examination of the origins of total war. The author has a persuasive argument that Sherman did not invent the concept of total war, but he does not examine the historical debate in the depth it deserves, considering the strong opinions that present-day academics hold about Sherman's role. Adding a brief analysis of the discussion from the last twenty years would have been useful.

Moreover, the author does not explain why he ignores recent books (especially considering the chapter title). For example, he mentions Michael Fellman's 1995 biography (negatively) but completely ignores John F. Marszalek's 1993 work, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order*. He likewise omits Stanley P. Hirshon's 1997 *The White Tecumseh: A Biography of William T. Sherman* and the 2001 *Sherman: A Soldier's Life* by Lee Kennett. On the other hand, he includes the 1984 book by journalist James Reston Jr., *Sherman's March and Vietnam*, which has had little impact on Sherman's reputation.

But these criticisms are minor; all-in-all this book is a fine examination of how our perceptions of the Civil War have evolved in the past one hundred and fifty years. Perhaps the book's most significant contribution will be to show that history always changes, and interpretations of history are often the result of current trends at the time of writing. The book is instructive in reminding us that even modern historians are burdened by their own past and their own objectives, and each generation has its own version of historical people and events.

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