

A Late Encounter With the Civil War

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Review

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Kreyling, Michael *A Late Encounter with the Civil War*. University of Georgia Press, \$19.95 ISBN 978-0820346571

A Study of how we Remember

In this slender volume, a revised version of his Lamar Memorial Lectures at Mercer University, Michael Kreyling offers a probing examination of the complex ways Americans have grappled with the memory and meaning of the Civil War. The author, a professor of English at Vanderbilt University, is particularly interested in the tacit “vocabularies” that inform “what” and “how” we remember (71). Measuring the space between the semi-centennial, the centennial, and the sesquicentennial, Kreyling renders an original and thought-provoking look at the relationship between history and memory – unpacking the dynamic and inherently political process by which the past is used in the present.

By placing the war’s fiftieth anniversary in the context of early twentieth century fears of “race suicide,” Kreyling’s first chapter imparts a stunningly original reading of a commemoration that is best remembered for images of tottering veterans extending their hands across the stonewall at Gettysburg. Obsessed with both racial purity and eugenic ideas, Americans committed themselves to a narrative of white “redemption.” Kreyling reminds us that it was not merely a shared racism, but also shared racial anxieties, that promoted sectional reconciliation. “Americans,” he contends, “quelled passions with images of perpetuated racial mastery” (27). Through nuanced readings of period fiction and film, especially the work of Thomas Dixon, Kreyling observes the process by which the war became a triumphal story of tribal salvation. What the author does not address, however, is the possibility that such pervasive racial angst worked in precisely the opposite way. Did not misgivings about the deaths of so many thousands of white men in an emancipation war contribute to the historiographic moment (in the 1920s and 1930s) dominated by writers who

looked askance at a “needless” war?

The next chapter explores the centennial, fraught with its own bundle of anxieties: the ongoing struggle for black civil rights, the Cold War, and the sense (prompted by the death of Albert Woolson, the last surviving Civil War veteran) that the war was no longer retrievable. With a perceptive analysis of the work of Robert Penn Warren, Edmund Wilson, Flannery O’Connor, and others, he concludes that “there was no longer a simplistic Civil War narrative with heroic American warriors on both sides,” and that the war’s ability “to ignite public interest” was “waning” (41, 32). Kreyling does not entirely ignore those who tidied up the war during the centennial, but he may overstate the degree to which the war was receding as a force in American historical memory. If official commemorative organs grew weary of battle reenactments, the public continued to consume Bruce Catton trilogies and attended Civil War Round Table meetings in droves.

His portrait of the sesquicentennial is mostly dreary – “set adrift,” he writes, in a maddening sea of postmodernism. In large measure, his assessments echo those offered by the cast of contributors to Thomas Brown’s 2011 anthology, *Remixing the Civil War*: the South is a dynamic and changing place; “alternate” histories are proliferating, absolving certain groups of the “burden” of the past; and the Civil War narrative, far from conjuring weepy-eyed reverence, is fundamentally unhinged (84).

One of Kreyling’s chief contentions – that the politics of the present moment shapes, in both willful and inadvertent ways, the content of commemorations held at “appointed times” (71) – will be old news to memory scholars. But it is a mark of his ultimate success that Kreyling leaves readers with more questions than he answers. The chapter on the sesquicentennial is a case in point. In commemorating the sesquicentennial by focusing on black civil rights, is the National Park Service repenting for the sins of the centennial, “fighting a bygone culture war rather than the current one?” (73). How will new media shape the process of remembrance? And will the “romance of mixed blood” emerge as “the language in which we remember the Civil War?” (94) As these questions abundantly attest, no scholar with an interest in the war or the contours of American historical memory can afford to miss an encounter with this book.

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Civil War (2014), he is at work on a biography of Benjamin Butler.