

# Uncommonly Savage: Civil War and Remembrance in Spain and the United States

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## Review

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**Escott, Paul D.** *Uncommonly Savage: Civil War and Remembrance in Spain and the United States*. University Press of Florida, \$74.95 ISBN 9780813049410

### Memory Shaped in Defeat and Victory in the American South and Spain

Transnational history is all the rage among historians. It can take various forms—comparing events in two or more nations, tracing the influence of ideas or processes across national borders, or placing the story of one nation in a larger international context such as the Atlantic world. *Uncommonly Savage: Civil War and Remembrance in Spain and the United States* takes the comparative approach and provides one of the first major transnational studies of the South's memory of the Civil War. Its author, Paul D. Escott, a distinguished historian, has published several important books on the American South. Not surprisingly, then, *Uncommonly Savage* displays a sure command of its history, but Escott's knowledge of modern Spanish history seems impressive as well. As if that were not enough, Escott includes a very interesting section on how several other countries have sought "truth and reconciliation" after internal conflicts. *Uncommonly Savage* is an intellectual *tour de force*.

It compares the way in which the American South reacted to defeat in the Civil War with how Spain dealt with the aftermath of its civil war in the 1930s. In most chapters, Escott begins with an introduction comparing the response in the two societies, followed by longer, independent sections that trace what happened in each nation—an approach that works quite well. In the process, he offers interesting comparative insights. In "both countries," he finds, "wartime issues proved persistent and important" and shaped political debate for many years. (p. 111) In both the old elite stayed in place, and, for a very long time, those elites helped sustain a conservative if not reactionary social order. The major difference Escott finds is that in the United States the defeated shaped the memory and impact of the civil war; in Spain, the victors played a much more decisive role. Francisco Franco, with the help of the Catholic Church and the

army, shaped the memory of the Spanish Civil War. After Franco's death and the rise of the socialists, though, attitudes toward the conflict began to change, as they also did in the American South in the late-twentieth century.

Escott's careful comparative conclusions prove interesting in and of themselves, but the comparison with Spain may not contribute much to a new understanding of the role of the memory of the American Civil War. Escott nevertheless presents a compelling, if not always fully convincing, interpretation of what happens in the South after the Civil War. Given the presumed interests of the readers of the *Civil War Book Review*, the focus here will be on it. Escott skillfully examines three developments: the construction of the memory of the Civil War, that memory's role in helping shape the political and cultural order that followed the war, and finally the emergence of reconciliation and an end to the persistent battles over its memory in more recent years.

At the heart of Escott's interpretation is his contention that race was central to the Civil War, about which he is, on one level, absolutely right. It should have led not just to emancipation but to racial equality. It did not. After emancipation, the white South sought to maintain white supremacy and, by the late nineteenth century, succeeded in creating a new rigid system of racial repression. Its "ideology and memory," Escott adds, "brought the triumph of racism and southern viewpoints" (p. 90) within the nation, or as he also puts it, the South won "the peace, at least in regard to race." (p. 48) The Lost Cause, or the white South's memory of the Civil War, played an important part in creating and sustaining that racial order. Escott traces the rise of the Lost Cause in the years before 1900, showing the role of the veterans, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and various writers. Together, they constructed a memory of the war that celebrated the gallantry and nobility of the soldiers. The resulting memory also ignored southerners' earlier, open acknowledgment that the defense of slavery led to secession and incorporated a romantic image of the Old South, one that included a very benign view of slavery. Both denying the role of slavery in the war and romanticizing the Old South helped undermine calls for black equality.

The white South's belief in the Lost Cause meant that the "memories and resentments" of the war "endured for generations," supported segregation, and buttressed a conservative social and political order. After the war, "politics became the tool for southern elites to guard and preserve vital characteristics of their region. Consolidating power within the South, and then exploiting power

within the federal system, southern elites maintained their region as the reactionary and backward-looking part of the 'two United States.'" The "South stood apart from the American model. It was the other society--hierarchical and elite-dominated, backward looking, non-democratic, repressive, and fundamentalist in culture and religion." The South as the "other United States proved an enduring legacy, rather than a casualty, of the American Civil War." (p. 136) Through the first half of the twentieth century, white southerners maintained their status as a second United States in part by their consistent support for and domination of the Democratic Party; their loyalty to it resulted from the party's willingness and ability to prevent federal intervention in the South's social and, particularly, racial order. Escott even attributes southern support for the Progressive and New Deal era expansion of federal power, not to any ideological commitment to reform, but to southern Democrats' sense that they owed their assistance to their northern counterparts in return for keeping the federal government at bay on race and labor relations.

In the years between 1945 and 1990, however, both southern society and white southern attitudes about the Civil War began to change. The civil rights movement played an important role. So too did a new economic prosperity, resulting in part from an end to southern economic isolation but even more from federal military spending in the region. Rising wealth, Escott argues, gave "people reason to feel that their present and future no longer" were "governed by the divisions of the past." (p. 196) Escott presents a convincing explanation of the economic changes in the South, and he provides an insightful discussion of current attitudes toward the Civil War, one of the best in print and one of the most important contributions of the book. He astutely evaluates the role of the League of the South, Sons of Confederate Veterans, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and Confederate re-enactors. He does not ignore the persistence of these and other "[d]ie-hard Confederates" but sees them as increasingly marginal in southern society. (p. 103) Even the racial agenda of some who show continued interest in the war, he adds, "has lost its respectability." "Fascination with the war survives," he acknowledges "but increasingly it expresses either an extreme reaction against modernity and big government or a romantic escape from the anonymity of mass society into a simpler era, where individual courage and commitment made a difference." (p. 100) Nevertheless, Escott concludes, if the "political system of the Lost Cause and segregation is gone, a conservative social order, buttressed by a fundamentalist religion similar to Spain's, remains." (p. 162) So, too, does "a strong sense of southern identity" rooted in a desire to

counter northerners' long history of presumed superiority rather than a desire to continue to refight the war. (p. 215)

Escott makes a strong case for his vision of a repressive South shaped by the Lost Cause, white supremacy, and elite control. It cannot and should not be dismissed, yet his interpretation of post-Civil War developments might benefit from greater complexity. His case for the North as a "passive" participant in the debate over the war, content to let the South win the peace, perhaps does not tell the full story. (p. 77) The North may have been less "passive" than satisfied. As Escott rightly argues, it fought the war to preserve the Union and always saw "the rebels were countrymen, a part of the Union that must be restored." (p. 78) Both goals pushed the North toward reunion and reconciliation. The war did come to be about slavery, and the North could and did congratulate itself that the institution was abolished, an accomplishment that may well be more important than Escott's focus on continued racial repression allows. The twentieth century racial order, repressive and oppressive though it was, still proved better than the slave system. Most important, as Escott argues, the North had never really embraced racial equality as a war aim nor did it develop much investment in ensuring it after the war. Until well into the twentieth century, white northerners may not have perceived segregation as a southern victory; indeed they often practiced their own version of it. Northerners, then, had good reason to believe they had won, had accomplished exactly what they had sought, and saw little need to continue fighting.

Escott's portrait of southern politics may also be questioned. He may well underestimate the degree of southern support for Progressive and New Deal era legislation. Some southern Democrats not only voted for they championed many of the federal reforms of both eras. Some elite southerners saw a few of them as a way to protect their economic interests; poor whites and their champions saw the federal government as a means to help alleviate their economic woes. If the federal government stayed out of race and labor relations, both groups endorsed its expanded role. Substantial southern support for federal aid suggests that white southerners had embraced, however gingerly, reunion and that the region, though it had a distinctive social order and sense of identity, had a more complex relation to the federal government and the nation itself than Escott's account would indicate. To see the South as a part of the nation, rather than a second United States, makes the willingness of the federal government to invest so many military dollars in the region and the South's eagerness to accept them seem a little more logical. At the same time, it makes the postwar transformation

in southern attitudes a little less sudden and total, and not just the result of economic prosperity.

Many, maybe most, southern historians hold to a view of southern attitudes toward the federal government close to Escott's and will accept his portrait of the region. Many of them, and others, concur in his contention that the South won the peace. Whether readers agree or see the South's relationship to the nation and the outcome of the Civil War as more complex, they will learn much about the South from Escott and, unless they have his command of the subject, just as much if not more about Spain. *Uncommonly Savage* is an uncommonly learned, thoughtful, and provocative book.

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