

Interpreting Sacred Ground: The Rhetoric of National Civil War Parks and Battlefields

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Review

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Spielvogel, J. Christian *Interpreting Sacred Ground: The Rhetoric of National Civil War Parks and Battlefields*. University of Alabama Press, \$34.95 ISBN 9780817317751

Examining Narratives of Public History

In 1990s, the National Park Service (NPS) shifted its focus from simply preserving historic sites to interpreting them within a historical framework. This change presents challenges—particularly in the case of the American Civil War where the contest over public memory is particularly virulent. In *Interpreting Sacred Ground*, J. Christian Spielvogel—an associate professor of communication at Hope College—conducts what he calls a “close rhetorical analysis” (Spielvogel, 2) of how the NPS interprets the Civil War sites for which they are responsible. In so doing, he enters a small but growing field that integrates Civil War memory and public history. Spielvogel concludes that at some popular sites (particularly Gettysburg National Military Park), the NPS inadvertently tends toward advancing an interpretation of the war that glorifies heroic masculinity and white reconciliation at the expense of interpretations that emphasize the racial causes and consequences of the war or which emphasize the savage nature of Civil War combat.

Spielvogel’s argument is well organized and his conclusions are clearly stated. In his first chapter, he contends that the NPS presentation of the Gettysburg Address implicitly supports an interpretation of the speech that champions white reconciliation, but ignores how African-Americans appropriated Lincoln’s language for their own purposes. Spielvogel contrasts this with how Harper’s Ferry National Historic Park deals with race in his second chapter. According to Spielvogel, the Park Service’s John Brown Museum successfully demonstrates how to integrate a racially focused “emancipationist” interpretation into the public spaces protected by the NPS. In the third and fourth chapters, Spielvogel returns the reader to Gettysburg where he argues that the

language, graphics and even the placement of the signs on the battlefield tour glorify a heroic masculinity that masks the senseless and mechanized nature of combat in the Civil War. Spielvogel then compares the heroic interpretation of Gettysburg with the “savage” interpretation of the Civil War that visitors receive on the walking tour of Cold Harbor. He concludes the chapter by suggesting the NPS has an obligation to remind the public of the “darker side of humanity” (Spielvogel, 151) that emerges when societies go to war.

Spielvogel asks the right questions and he is undoubtedly correct when he notes that the NPS shouldered a great responsibility when it took on its role as arbiter of public memory. Yet, Spielvogel’s argument possesses several major flaws that diminish its effectiveness considerably. Perhaps most problematic is that he fails to take into account recent changes in NPS interpretation. In 2008, for example, Gettysburg National Battlefield unveiled a new multi-million-dollar visitor center and museum that reflects an unequivocal move by the NPS to emphasize the racial origins and results of the Civil War. He notes this in passing, but does not indicate how it alters his argument. In addition, reading Kevin Levin’s *Remembering the Battle of the Crater* might have helped Spielvogel see some of the strides that the NPS has made in interpreting black military contributions to the war at Petersburg National Battlefield.

Spielvogel could have greatly improved his argument with a more extensive reading of the secondary literature. While he makes extensive use of David Blight’s seminal *Race and Reunion*, he fails to account for more recent scholarship in the field of Civil War memory. In particular, Gary Gallagher’s *The Union War* might have prevented Spielvogel from erroneously casting the debate over public memory as a simple binary between reconciliation and emancipation. In the second half of the book, Spielvogel uses Gerald Linderman’s *Embattled Courage* to note the shift from soldiers’ idealism to disillusionment but fails to note that Linderman’s conclusions have been called into question by James McPherson’s *For Cause and Comrades* and Earl Hess’s *The Union Soldier in Battle*.

Ultimately, *Interpreting Sacred Ground* will leave historians disappointed. Though Spielvogel asks all the right questions and presents his argument elegantly, disappointing flaws stemming from not having command of the secondary sources greatly mar his work.

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