

The Rebel Yell: A Cultural History

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Recommended Citation

Andrew, Rod Jr. (2015) "The Rebel Yell: A Cultural History," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 17 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.2.28

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss2/27>

Review

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Spring 2015

Warren, Craig A. *The Rebel Yell: A Cultural History*. University of Alabama Press, \$34.95 ISBN 9780817318482

“The Ugliest Sound that Any Mortal Ever Heard:” The Rebel Yell in American History and Culture

The famous, high-pitched “rebel yell” began its career as a distinctive war cry and a means of communication for Confederate soldiers, and soon became a marker of white southern identity. By the end of the twentieth century, the term “rebel yell” was still associated with fierce individualism and collective defiance, but its uses had evolved to include everything from a label for a brand of bourbon, to the name of a roller coaster, to the title track of an album by British punk rocker Billy Idol, who was not even thinking of the southern American Confederacy when he wrote its lyrics. Despite public fascination with the historic rebel yell both as a Civil War battle cry and as a supposedly “lost” cultural artifact, it has received sparse scholarly attention before Craig A. Warren’s intriguing and thoughtful study. Of course the rebel yell appears often in Civil War memoirs and battle studies. Yet scholars have given little careful attention to its origins, uses, cultural significance, or even to what it really sounded like; nor to its evolution and uses from the end of the Civil War to the present.

During the war, participants and ear-witnesses described the Confederates’ high-pitched screams differently, but one thing Confederates, Union troops, and foreign observers agreed on was that the rebel yell was unique—a far cry from any shouts uttered by Union or European soldiers. One point that Warren argues most convincingly, however, is that there was not simply one rebel yell. By studying textual accounts and the few surviving audio recordings by Confederate veterans, he concludes that every soldier used a different pitch, or combination of pitches, and rhythm. Perhaps it was the resulting discordance that not only made the rebel yell a form of individual expression but also provided its eerie,

unsettling, and indefinable character when uttered simultaneously by thousands of voices.

Warren next carefully considers various theories on how the rebel yell originated, some of which are quite recent and most of which have little foundation. Warren does not categorically dismiss theories of Native American, Celtic, African American, and even Hispano-Muslim roots, but suggests that most likely the yell was a regional indigenous development among southern whites in the decades preceding the Civil War. Antebellum rural southerners employed "hunting calls, frontier battle cries, and hollering related to animal husbandry," as well as a variety of loud cries to convey greetings, warnings, and other messages across long distances (p. 64). When southern men went to war in 1861, it was only natural that they brought distinctive high-pitched hollers with them into the army.

Between 1865 and 1948, Warren claims, the rebel yell was perhaps the leading symbol of white southern identity, and could deliver political and social messages within the reunited nation. This was a period in which, as John Coski has shown, the Confederate battle flag rarely appeared in public. Warren may not be able to prove his claim, but he does demonstrate that the yell captured popular imagination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Postwar descriptions of the rebel yell itself contributed to southern identity by contrasting the studied, mechanical, uniform cheers of Union soldiers with the wild individuality of the southern battle cry. Some Confederate veterans resented attempts to mimic the yell. They claimed it was a "lost" artifact of the rebel soldier—that it existed and could only be produced by southern soldiers on the field of battle or in the camp. These claims did nothing to dampen popular curiosity as to what it actually sounded like, and other veterans were happy to be recorded performing it publicly, including at a soldiers' reunion in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in 1938. And, as regional bitterness decreased, the rebel yell became a symbol both of southern regional pride and of American patriotism.

During the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, the Confederate battle flag surpassed the yell as a marker of southern defiance amidst battles over states' rights and white supremacy. Still, segregationists occasionally employed the rebel yell against civil rights activists and symbols of federal authority. Unlike the battle flag, however, the yell was able to shed its association in the popular mind with white supremacy. Instead, by the late twentieth century, its cultural meaning became more diffuse. While still symbolizing defiance and

individuality, it lost its terrifying quality and became, as Warren notes on p. xviii, a “largely comic form of personal expression.” And the phrase “rebel yell” could become almost completely divorced from its historical roots when used by late-twentieth and twenty-first century musicians, distilling companies, amusement parks, and novelists.

For several reasons, Warren deserves much credit for rendering this very readable, thoughtful, and well-researched study of one of America’s most distinctive aural artifacts. He has imaginatively confronted the challenge of tracing the history of a sound that resists textual reproduction or description. He has also been sensitive to the various ways in which an evolving “sonic experience” (p. xiv) can tell us much about regional and national identity and popular memory. And he has provided an excellent example of why Civil War history need not, and should not, restrict itself chronologically to the decade of the 1860s, nor even to the nineteenth century. *The Rebel Yell* should enjoy a wide readership among historians of the Civil War, the American South, and modern American culture, and many will consider assigning it to their graduate students and upper-level undergraduates.

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