

### The Civil War Veteran: a Historical Reader

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## Review

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**Logue, Larry M. and Barton, Michael, eds..** *The Civil War Veteran: A Historical Reader*. New York University Press, \$26.00 softcover ISBN 9780814752043

After the Fight

Veterans of the Civil War

If Clausewitz was correct in arguing that armies are reflections of the societies from whence they come, the same can certainly be said of individual combat veterans, especially those who began their war as civilians rather than professional soldiers already one step removed from the citizenry. That the vast majority of veterans both North and South came directly from a society that valued and often overrated its citizen-soldier tradition is doubly significant.

Editors Larry M. Logue, Professor of History and Political Science at Mississippi College and author of *To Appomattox and Beyond: The Civil War Soldier in War and Peace*, and Michl Barton, Professor of American Studies and Social Science at Pennsylvania State University-Harrisburg and author of *Goodmen: The Character of Civil War Soldiers*, have added much to our understanding of the American soldier's fundamental inseparability from society. Organized into five topical units: Transition to Peace, Problems of Readjustment, Governments Provide Aid, Veterans Fight Their Own Battles, and Veterans Shape the Collective Memory, this volume provides a broad spectrum of interpretations. Dixon Wecter's 1944 view of war as a suppressor of the combatant's past invites reassessment by Barton and other more recent observers, even though references to Wecter's and Emory Thomas's similar view of the Confederate experience serve as a useful historiographical point of departure for readers in search of an overview or research topics of their own. More often than not, one meets veterans whose societal and cultural baggage could not always be discarded when the uniforms were issued. Not even the comradeship and regimentation of soldiering wielded enough power over individuals to produce a

single overarching perspective, either Northern or Southern.

Writing of Jubal Early's efforts to sanctify Lee and romanticize the prewar past, for example, Gaines Foster argues that Early's essentially elitist interpretation garnered little appeal outside of Virginia, and the Virginia aristocracy at that. Similarly, when the United Confederate Veterans supplanted the Southern Historical Society as the South's dominant veterans' group during the 1890s, its emphasis on the role of the enlisted man, his purported respect for property, and rejection of an idealized antebellum South highlighted social and geographic divides less visible in conventional Lost Cause historiography. Rifts also existed within the Deep South. At the 1890 Mississippi constitutional convention, Confederate veterans who controlled the franchise committee ensured black disfranchisement. Nevertheless, notes Logue, a sharply defined split existed between the upcountry and cotton belt. As for the Northern "soldier vote," that, too, could vary according to local conditions. Stuart McConnell uncovers a GAR chapter in Philadelphia whose wealthy membership maintained a reserved attitude toward pensions, and Logue mentions Indiana veterans who, having benefited from Democratic favoritism in pension distribution, could not necessarily be counted on to vote Republican. Peter Blanck, Chen Song, and Donald R. Shaffer all find that pension application success rates often varied according to ethnicity, with German assimilationism, Irish nationalism and Black illiteracy surfacing as distinguishing features. Essays by W. Fitzhugh Brundage and Richard Reid further highlight the peculiar problems faced by USCT veterans, most of who came from the South and lived there after the war. Even within the southern black community, these Union men often found themselves subordinated to lighter skinned community leaders from Northern backgrounds.

If confronted by the absence of archetypal Union and Confederate veterans, readers in search of a common denominator will at least note their frequent reliance on agenda-driven memory, presentism, and sometimes willful deceit. In Patrick J. Kelly's study, we see Benjamin Butler covering up segregation in soldiers' homes in a report to Congress. Foster notes that respect for private property, a trait which the United Confederate Veterans attributed to their former selves, was an 1890s value rather than an 1860s one, while McConnell depicts a GAR whose lack of interest in social and political change during the nineties was much more in line with American popular opinion of three decades earlier.

For history students in search of well-documented historical parallels, this volume offers the greatest dividends. Eric T. Dean, Jr. finds that Civil War

soldiers suffered just as surely from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as did their Vietnam Era descendants, and several contributors note both GAR and UCV pressure on textbook publishers to render skewed but politically correct histories. And David W. Blight's commentary on a segregated Wilsonian society's view of its own past invites comparison with more recent politicians who also re-interpreted the sacrifices of others to their own advantage -- even when the scale of distortion was so colossal that it called for more forgetting than remembering. In the end, popularized collective perceptions past or present reveal more about the perceivers.

*The Civil War Veteran* is excellent social history from the rank and file up and should find its way onto numerous Reconstruction and the New South course reading lists. The notes and concluding bibliographic essay alone make it worth owning.

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