

### The Good Men Who Won the War: Army of the Cumberland Veterans and Emancipation Memory

Barbara A. Gannon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Gannon, Barbara A. (2010) "The Good Men Who Won the War: Army of the Cumberland Veterans and Emancipation Memory," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 3 .  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol12/iss3/13>

## Review

Gannon, Barbara A.

Summer 2010

**Hunt, Robert** *The Good Men Who Won the War: Army of the Cumberland Veterans and Emancipation Memory*. University of Alabama Press, \$36.00 ISBN 978-0-8173-1688-4

### Complicated Memories

Robert Hunt's *The Good Men Who Won the War: Army of the Cumberland Veterans and Emancipation Memory* tests the truth of Walt Whitman's claim that the "real war will never be in the books." Hunt, a professor in the Department of History at Middle Tennessee State University, examines memoirs written by Union soldiers in this western army to see if these men remembered emancipation—what we currently consider the "real," or important, outcome of the war.

The destruction of slavery was not always seen as part of the real war; until well into the twentieth century, white Americans forgot emancipation as central to the causes and consequences of the Civil War. This amnesia may explain why scholars have debated northern soldiers' commitment to ending slavery during the war, and their memory of emancipation in its aftermath. Most recently, James McPherson and Chandra Manning agreed that, while most northern soldiers initially rejected the notion that they were fighting to end slavery, eventually, most northern soldiers endorsed emancipation as a war aim. While they may have accepted emancipation during the war, David Blight argues that in the war's aftermath northern veterans shared the same amnesia as their contemporaries and forgot the centrality of emancipation to the war's causes and consequences. Blight believes that Civil War memory, or lack of memory, was key to understanding the disaster that befell black Americans at the end of the nineteenth century—the beginning of the era of disenfranchisement and Jim Crow.

In contrast to Blight's view, Hunt contends that emancipation was central to what Army of the Cumberland veterans believed they had achieved by their wartime victory. Hunt argues that veterans "incorporated emancipation and its legacy into their...search for innocence" which he argues was lost by the necessities of total war—the mobilization of northern society and the hard war policies against southern society (5). Hunt believes that these men came to terms with Total War by making "emancipation into part of the comprehensive picture of American war making: a justification for American war in general" (5). Hunt does not see any contradiction in the memory of emancipation and the failure to protect former slaves' civil rights. Instead, he argues that this failure was similar to others that have occurred in the wake of American wars in which "we have organized overwhelming power and used it to destroy (or threaten) the immediate enemy, but 'real' victory has always remained elusive, fuzzy or quickly redefined by circumstance" (136). Total wars, he concludes, do not lead to total victory.

While American wars may sometimes fail to achieve their objectives, Hunt manages to accomplish his goal. Hunt has written an outstanding and thought-provoking book; its thesis is well-argued and, for the most part, thoroughly convincing. Based on my own research on this subject, he is correct; emancipation is central to Northern veterans' wartime memories. While I agree with his thesis based on my own research, I believe that the reader will be convinced by Hunt's judicious use of his evidence; for example, his keen understanding of the strengths and limitations of memoirs. Moreover, while some scholars seem challenged by similar sources because their authors wrote sentimental and racist reminiscences, Hunt is not. In a welcome nod to common sense, he places these men's memoirs in the context and argues that it would have been "odd" if these men had been anything but sentimental and racist given the times in which they lived.

While I found much to admire in this study, I would like to propose other ways of looking at this material. While I agree these men suffered a loss of innocence, I am not convinced that it was caused by an abstract notion like total war. Instead, I would like to suggest that this loss of innocence was very personal. Wars, either total or limited, destroy the innocence of their participants, but it is primarily because these men, and now women, can never imagine the "real war" and its horrors. Hunt chronicles just such a loss on innocence: a veteran recalled a soldier in hospital who "called, in his delirium, for his wife and children, appealing to them by name and crying [he insisted] with pain in his

feet. Poor fellow! both legs had been amputated at the thigh.” The man eventually died after a great deal of suffering. The veteran explained that he could not “allow [him]self to think of these sights and scenes, even now, almost a third of a century later” (65). If veterans need to come to terms with their wartime loss of innocence, it is more likely prompted by these type of memories. Finally, Hunt’s assertion that the Civil War is somehow typical of Americans’ failure to achieve total victory after total war may or may not be true; it would require more comparative work, across different wars and their aftermaths, to make this important argument.

None of my suggestions detract from the value of this study. I strongly recommend this book for students examining the Civil War and its aftermath; its brevity and readability will make it a welcome addition to any classroom. Overall, this is an outstanding contribution to understanding the legacy of the Civil War in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

*Barbara A. Gannon is an Assistant Professor of Military History at the University of Central Florida. Her forthcoming book, The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic, will be published by the University of North Carolina Press in 2011.*