

Haunted by Atrocity, Civil War Prisons in American Memory

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Review

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Breaking the Chains of Civil War Prison History

As in WWII, many combatants and former POWs of the American Civil War remained haunted by their experiences long after the conflict ended.

Passed down through many generations of the Henry-Neal family through the present day, great-great grandfather John R. Henry of Co. A, 17th Iowa Infantry, returned to his Leon, Iowa home after many months' confinement at Andersonville prison in Georgia "jumpy" and "jittery" and would often jump behind the couch upon hearing any loud noise (Interview of Linda Greenlee, great-great-step-grand-daughter of John Robert Henry, by Lonnie R. Speer, Corydon, Iowa, June 10, 2001). He continued to suffer like this throughout his remaining days, passing away within two years of the war's end.

In North Carolina, according to later ancestors of Robert B. Rogers, Co. L, 16th North Carolina Troops, Robert returned home after months of confinement at Camp Douglas in Chicago, Illinois, a "broken man," being underweight, sickly, shaky and nervous. He too died within a few short years of returning home (Interview of Flora May Fulbright Ward, great-great-granddaughter of Robert B. Roges, by Lonnie R. Speer, Lake Junaluska, NC, May 17, 1996).

In yet another example, Ephraim B. Elliott, brother of the Confederate Congressman John M. Elliott, was frequently seen drunk on the streets of his hometown Prestonburg, Kentucky, during the winter of 1864-65 loudly praising "Jeff Davis" and cursing the "Yankees." His once powerful and wealthy family was ruined by the war. In addition, two of his brothers were killed fighting for the Confederacy and his wife that he had left behind in 1861, had died of disease before his return in 1865. Ephraim was later admitted to mental asylums in

Kentucky on two occasions and finally, in 1878, put a gun to his head to end his life-long torment.

Haunted By Atrocity, Civil War Prisons in American Memory is an overall study of the impact that the Civil War's military prisons had on our nation's memory, emphasizing such subjects as the "bloody shirt" declarations in the Reconstruction period of the South and how "martyred Union POWs" became a favored topic of contemporary magazine and newspaper articles, Northern politicians and speakers at many memorial events, as a just a few examples. Author Benjamin Cloyd further examines how the "blame game" was further utilized as the South countered northern accusations claiming that high death rates and deplorable conditions in camps were intentional and arguing that the North's destruction of the transportation system led to problems in food distribution, while the federal blockade of the Confederate coastline led to a medical supplies scarcity and the breakdown of the Dix - Hill Cartel prisoner exchange system due to political squabbling were largely to blame.

Cloyd also points out that another strong influence on northern and southern memories of the war included the many prison narrative books published from the 1880s and into the early 1900s, – initially northern and later southern – became embittered diatribes focused on the enemy's avowed purpose of designing prisons to kill as many of the unfortunate captives as possible. These all continued to play a key role in the "blame game" until the old veterans began passing away in large numbers.

During the Civil War, approximately 56,000 Union and Confederate soldiers died in the military prison camps. Their deaths provoked outrage on both sides, and both the Lincoln and Davis administrations manipulated the prison controversy to serve as propaganda to convince citizens of each side of the relative virtue of their own prison system and, as a result, they etched hardened and divisive memories of the prison controversy into the American psyche and memories of that war. Later generations all know about Andersonville in the South but few know the morbid details about Elmira or Camp Douglas in the North.

In *Haunted by Atrocity*, Benjamin G. Cloyd deftly analyzes how Americans have remembered the military prisons of the Civil War from the war itself to how it has impacted our nation's history and politics throughout our history to the present-day.

As the first analysis of Civil War memory to focus exclusively on the military prison camps, *Haunted by Atrocity* offers a detailed study of how generations of Americans have unconsciously constructed their recollections of historical events, whether based on myths or facts, in their own knowledge of the Civil War's history. I wholeheartedly recommend *Haunted By Atrocity, Civil War Prisons in American Memory* as a necessity for any Civil War library.

Lonnie Speer is a regular contributor to Civil War Book Review and has written for a number of historical publications including America's Civil War and Civil War Times Illustrated. He is author of the groundbreaking work Portals to Hell, Military Prisons of the Civil War (Stackpole Books, 1997) and War of Vengeance, Acts of Retaliation against Civil War POWs (Stackpole Books, 2002). His Portals to Hell is now being published in Paperback under the Bison imprint by the University of Nebraska Press. Currently, Speer is completing another book dealing with Civil War POWs and has two other books in various stages of publication.