

The Death and Resurrection of Jefferson Davis

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Review

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Lest We Forget, Lest We Forget

The Life of the Legend of Jefferson Davis

Moving is not a word one associates with histories of memory. Donald E. Collins's *Death and Resurrection of Jefferson Davis* is an exception to that rule. In large part, the emotional power of the work lies in the interplay between its two primary objectives. First, it seeks to complete the biography of the Confederate president by taking his life story beyond the usual point of completion: death. Following a brief summary of the high points of Davis's career through the Civil War and its immediate aftermath, the author describes the closing years of Davis's life, his two funerals, and the construction of the Confederate national monument to him in Richmond. The descriptions of the major events are fascinating and superbly complement the many books on Davis already available.

Second, Collins traces the history of the memory of Davis. By describing the closing acts of Davis's life and the major events in which he was involved following his demise, the author tells the tale of Davis's resurrection in the public eye. At the Confederacy's collapse, its former chief was widely reviled by virtually everyone. Northerners thought him a traitor. Southerners judged him incompetent. African Americans saw him as the man who tried to keep them in chains. Beginning in the mid-1880s, Davis's image dramatically improved in the eyes of most, especially southerners.

According to Collins, the change dates to Davis's tour of Alabama and Georgia during 1886-87. At each stop on the tour, the populace received him as a hero, to the extent that upon his arrival in Macon, Georgia, 6,000 schoolchildren scattered the petals of flowers along his route from the train station to his

lodgings. Such adulation continued after his death, and it was during this time, writes Collins, that the memory of Davis underwent a marked transformation. During his first funeral, at the close of which he was temporarily entombed in New Orleans, those who participated remembered him chiefly as an American hero for his gallant service in the Mexican War and because of his service as a senator and Secretary of War. By the time of his second funeral, when Davis's body was re-interred in Richmond, participants and onlookers were far more willing to acknowledge his role as Confederate president alongside his service to the United States. Symbols of the Confederacy, including flags, figured prominently. The transformation from American to Confederate was complete by the time of the 1907 dedication of the Jefferson Davis Monument in Richmond. The monument itself symbolized the cause for which Davis fought, emphasizing the degree to which the ex-president had become the embodiment of the southern version of the Civil War.

Collins's descriptions of the adoration that accompanied Davis's tour, the lamentation that surrounded his funeral, and the celebration of his monument's dedication mesh well with his examination of peoples' changing view of Davis to render this book emotionally heady. In effect, the people of the South embraced Davis in death as they never had during the Civil War. From this standpoint, Jefferson Davis appears as a beloved leader who failed to be recognized as such during his presidency.

The Death and Resurrection of Jefferson Davis is valuable for more than just entertainment. Collins's book is a scholarly endeavor, which avoids whitewashing the Confederate experience of which Davis was such a vital part. Though Davis comes across as a sympathetic character, the author does not let readers forget that in addition to being a highly-principled and kind man the ex-president was also a proslavery advocate and moderate white supremacist. Moreover, though historians have long recognized that Davis's reputation among white southerners rebounded during the late 19th century, none other than Collins has so thoroughly detailed why. Just as important, no one else has examined the opinions of northerners and African Americans to the extent he has.

Besides occasional editorial errors, only a few things about this book could have been improved. For instance, Collins's argument that during Davis's first funeral the participants remembered him primarily as an American hero instead of as the Confederate president is problematic. Clearly the symbols of

Americanism dwarfed those of the Confederacy. A tantalizing question remains unanswered, however. How much of the American focus of the funeral was planned memorializing rather than genuine memory? After all, would it have become the largest funeral in the South's history had Davis not been remembered primarily as the former Confederate president? After all, Davis's position as the arch-traitor in the minds of many northern Republicans, who dominated national politics at the time, rendered overt celebration of his role in the War of the Rebellion politically dangerous. The portrayal of only the side of Davis that might appeal to northerners would certainly have been a prudent course. Could the Americanism have been little more than a blind on the part of reconciliationist funeral organizers? Still, it is important to note that few writers on the history of memory draw a clear distinction between memorializing and memory.

In addition, Collins's assertion on page 158 that Davis's place in the sun has, with little doubt, sunk below the horizon seems a bit premature. His justifications for this statement are an increase in attempts by political action groups to suppress public displays of Confederate symbols and the declining numbers of those willing to defend the southern interpretation of the Civil War. On the first point, he is surely right. Attacks on Civil War symbols are indeed commonplace. The banning of Confederate flags in many public school and the NAACP's ongoing, albeit ineffectual, boycott of South Carolina for its prominent display of the rebel battle standard on its capitol grounds are but two prominent examples.

On the other hand, those dedicated to preserving the symbols of the Lost Cause appear to be growing in number and effectiveness as well. For a time during the early 2000s, *Southern Partisan* had the fastest growing readership of any conservative newsmagazine. Similarly, several successful lawsuits on the part of southern heritage groups have forced the retention or return of flags and other symbols to public areas throughout the South. Of course the most striking example of the strength of those dedicated to presenting a southern version of the War Between the States was the 2002-2004 electoral ousting of the Democratic governor and legislature of Georgia, largely in response to their adoption of a new state flag that failed to prominently include the Confederate battle flag.

The fact that historians are now taking an active interest in both Jefferson Davis and in Confederate memory is equally telling. Increased interest in these subjects at least insures that they will not disappear from the public eye.

Moreover, some of these writers, most notably William J. Cooper, Jr., depict Jefferson Davis in the positive light that Collins suggests is burning out.

Though the book is not perfect, its faults are minor. *The Death and Resurrection of Jefferson Davis* remains an excellent work. By providing scholars and general readers with the moving final chapters of Davis's biography and by illuminating his place in southern memory, Collins has rendered an invaluable service to those interested in the Confederate leader and *his* Lost Cause.

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