

The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory

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Review

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Brundage, W. Fitzhugh *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*.
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History and Memory

Understanding the Southern Past

The relationship between memory and history has become a central concern for historians over the last several decades. Southern historians in particular have sought to examine the role played by memory in shaping our understanding of the southern past. The first wave of scholarship in this area, represented by the work of Charles Wilson and Gaines Foster focused on the significance of the Civil War for the formation of white southern identity. More recent work, best represented by the work of Stephanie Yuhl, has examined how historical tourism and historic preservation have dovetailed to produce imagined pasts.

W. Fitzhugh Brundage's **The Southern Past** both distills much of this past work and presses ahead to raise new questions. Most importantly, Brundage insists that we look beyond the traditional scholarly focus on white memory of the Civil War and examine how memory has functioned in the African American community. Part and parcel of this new focus, the author insists, is an examination of how black history has been systematically erased by a combination of white conservatism and the economic dislocations unleashed by the late twentieth century south's emergence as the Sunbelt.

Brundage begins by examining the role played by women in the shaping the celebration of the Lost Cause. Much of his discussion here reiterates what most Lost Cause scholars have said about women's involvement in Confederate memory. He does, however, raise some interesting questions when he joins the concerns of white, elite southern women to the broader movement among women to shape, even redefine, civic spaces. (53). Brundage notes that female guardians of the Lost Cause managed to impress their reactionary vision of the

South across the southern landscape. While the foregoing is empirically true, Brundage goes further and argues that in some parts of the nation, and even within the south itself, women's struggles in regard to public space bridged class and racial chasms. This is an interesting claim that, unfortunately, Brundage brushes past rather quickly. Some specific examples would have helped, given that most of us are familiar with how late nineteenth and early twentieth century women's struggles for reform often exhibited enormous racial, ethnic and class conflict.

The book's most compelling chapters concern efforts by African Americans to carve out public space for themselves and, in Brundage's phrase, to promote an African American collective identity (98). African Americans constructed, Brundage shows, a powerful counternarrative to the Lost Cause and did so in a very public fashion. The author's engaging discussion of these efforts makes the outcome of this hopeful era all the more poignant. In the early twentieth century, powerful cultural and institutional forces marred the historical record. Brundage shows that, in the South, the historic preservation movement primarily preserved the ideology of white supremacy.

Chapter 6, *Black Memorials and the Bulldozer Revolution*, provides the most compelling evidence that the struggle over memory permeates all areas of southern life. Brundage thoughtfully reconstructs how white supremacy and concerns for economic development came together in the 1960s to systematically destroy the Hayti neighborhood of Durham, North Carolina. Hayti, a district made up of prominent African American businesses, historic churches and a thriving street and music culture, fell victim to urban renewal and efforts by the white community to literally reconfigure the landscape. The sorry tale becomes especially powerful in Brundage's account because of his thorough discussion of white elites to use municipal, state and federal funds to clutter the landscape of the South with markers that celebrated both the significant and trivial deeds of whites. (326). Brundage also shows that the African American middle class found itself in an impossible quandary. Only beginning to gain their political strength, African American community leaders had to choose between supporting urban renewal that might (and eventually did) displace large portions of their community or siding with the rabid segregationists who opposed urban renewal as a form of Federal meddling (266).

Brundage concludes with a wide-ranging discussion of the contest over the variant meanings of the southern past waged over the last two decades. The

debate over the Arthur Ashe statue in Richmond, controversy over the memorialization of Confederate leaders in the naming of public schools and the hotly fought battle over the incorporation of the Confederate battle flag into southern state flags all come in for discussion. Brundage argues that growing black political power since the beginning of the Freedom Struggle made such controversies part of the evolution of southern culture. For example, he notes that debates over the naming and renaming of schools, rather than reflecting political correctness, actually point to a renewed sense of cultural custodianship among black parents and students (320). Formerly culturally, as well as politically disfranchised, African Americans now have the opportunity to assert themselves in the realm of memory.

The author, of course, finds this a hopeful sign and makes a good case for a positive denouement in the South's ongoing struggle to remember its past. He also sees dark clouds on the horizon. Unfortunately, he notes, the struggle over contested memory in many southern states has taken an ominous turn. Partisanship has become a part of the struggle as the Republican party has often taken the side of white traditionalists while heritage groups have come together to form a small but vociferous lobby in favor of all things Confederate. Brundage rightly fears that these variables could radically sharpen differences and make it increasingly difficult to forward efforts to adequately represent the southern past (341).

Many southern historians will quibble with the author's tendency to make the battle over memory such a central theme in the history of the South. As Brundage's own chronology makes clear, these struggles belong to a very specific era in the history of the region, an era hopefully in its death throes since the civil rights era. This fact raises interesting questions. Although beyond the scope of Brundage's work, it might be interesting to think about the role memory played in the antebellum South. Did nineteenth century southerners work as hard as their progeny would in shaping an imagined, and useful, past? Evidence from South Carolina suggests that this might be the case. In the 1850s, a wave of monument building swept the state as it began its downward spiral toward secession.

Southern historians will also, hopefully, enter more fully into a discussion with specialists in other fields and begin writing much-needed studies of comparative memory. Brundage himself alludes to this need when he notes that memory, rather than simply a product of crisis like the civil war, actually

represents a central and enduring feature of the history that shapes lived experience, whether in Alabama, Mexico or the Ukraine (11).

Brundage has written a compelling and vital work of southern history that both synthesizes and moves the discussion of memory forward. All students of southern history will find it valuable.

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