

The Ghosts Of Guerrilla Memory: How Civil War Bushwhackers Became Gunslingers In The American West

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Review

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Heroes from Another Land: Confederate Guerrillas and the making of the Wild West

Few events in American history generate as much popular interest and stir up as many conflicting memories as the Civil War and the Wild West. Both produced battles, heroes, villains, victims, drama, and controversy that left lasting imprints on American culture. Dominant narratives abound in both. Civil War accounts center on the famous leaders and battles in Virginia, Tennessee, and Georgia and foster collective memories anchored on the Lost Cause, emancipation, and the restoration of the Union. In the West, the inexorable march of civilization—punctuated by tales of railroads, cattle, miners, bison, Indians, outlaws, gamblers, and lawmen—ushers in end of the frontier as a dynamic catalyst for the development of American values. In *The Ghosts of Guerrilla Memory*, Matthew C. Hulbert skillfully uses memoirs, contemporary histories, Hollywood movies, and numerous primary sources to take some of the key figures from one of the unruly fringes of the Civil War—the ugly partisan bloodletting in Missouri and Kansas—and link their collective memories to the legendary outlaw myths of the Wild West.

At the epicenter of this fascinating process is Confederate guerrilla chief William Clark Quantrill, the Ohio-born architect of the 1863 raid on Lawrence, Kansas and one of the crucial figures in the construction of the border war's checkered legacy. Like many of his fellow guerrilla leaders, Quantrill did not survive the conflict, leaving it to his followers, enemies, victims, apologists, and a myriad of historians to sort out the truth about his life, death, and significance to the history and memory of the war. The first in this long line of chroniclers was former Confederate John Newman Edwards, whose 1877 tome *Noted*

Guerrillas, or Warfare on the Border attempted to incorporate Quantrill and the conflict in Missouri into the larger framework of the Lost Cause. While his portrayal of the guerrilla leader as a stone-cold killer was awash in hyperbole, his justification for the band's unfettered violence as self-defense against malevolent Kansas "Jayhawkers" was pure Lost Cause rhetoric. The motive behind this effort was mostly practical, as it served to place Missouri and its partisans into a unique sub-section of the Confederate war narrative, which in turn provided an ideological basis for the maintenance of White supremacy and Jim Crow.

In the wake of Edwards' influential work, the surviving partisans reinforced their own Confederate identities by holding reunions at various locations near the scenes of action. What began as a meeting between a handful of Quantrill's former comrades and his mother Caroline in 1888, morphed into a more formal set of encampments held annually between 1898 and 1929. These gatherings strove to integrate the border raiders into the larger story of the South's perseverance in the face of a destructive war, oppressive Reconstruction policies, and ongoing racial dysfunction. They adopted many Lost Cause themes, including the need to protect women and children from aggressive Yankees (both black and white), and attempted to fit in with the more respectable United Confederate Veterans. In this context, the raid on Lawrence became a retaliation for the deaths of southern women at the hands of their Union captors and thus a justifiable act of war. However, even as Quantrill's men attempted to join the mainstream Confederate veterans in their commemorative activities, dissenting voices appeared that pushed the guerrilla image in a new direction.

Not surprisingly, the first level of disagreement came from the former Unionists in nearby Kansas, who took issue with the idea that the vandals who pillaged Lawrence were somehow honorable soldiers. In 1909, William E. Connelley, "an avid chronicler of the Missouri-Kansas border war" wrote what he claimed would be a "serious study" (145) of those violent days in *Quantrill and the Border Wars*. His version describes Quantrill as a psychopath whose grotesquely violent tendencies were rooted in his flawed character and manifested during the border conflict. The heart of his narrative was the raid on Lawrence, where vivid accounts by survivors highlighted the brutality of the raiders towards the town's peaceful citizens. This hatchet job on Quantrill's image corresponded with efforts by the citizens of Lawrence to denounce the former raiders who still boldly held reunions just across the border. Other counter-jabs at the Edwards/Lost Cause version of Quantrill's life and career included a satirical 1875 play entitled "Quantrill the Queer," an epic poem

glorifying Jayhawker and arch-enemy Jim Lane, and a series of vivid (and often contradictory) eyewitness accounts describing the violent fate of the only raider killed during the Lawrence Raid.

The other challenge to the heroic Quantrill myth ironically came from the movement's own female contingent. One of the singular characteristics of the border war was the direct inclusion of families and homesteads as spies, runners, supply depots, hideouts, hospitals, and sources of moral support. The fluid nature of guerrilla warfare eliminated the safe rear areas common to a traditional military conflict and rendered the term "non-combatant" rather meaningless. Both sides accused the other of vulgarity, brutality, sexual assault, and the outright murder of women, children, and the elderly; both claimed that the right of retaliation justified continued violence. In a weird case of role reversal, guerrilla women often protected their men rather than the other way around. Tales of fierce women defending hearth and home from predatory Yankees dominated several published accounts and served to undermine the manhood of their oft-absent menfolk. Fitting the borderland fighters into the mainstream narrative proved difficult and ultimately unproductive, which led to another avenue for the construction (or de-construction) of guerrilla memory.

The second half of Hulbert's study focusses on how "Missouri's bushwhackers were culled from the Civil War borderlands, stripped of their Confederate context, and conflated with other western figures" (183) via dime novels and other forms of popular literature. With the James and the Younger brothers serving as key figures, this contingent of former raiders were folded in with characters like Billy the Kid to provide fodder for a sensationalized, mostly fictional construction of western outlaw tropes. Although there had been real shootouts, bank heists, and train robberies (notably the James/Younger gang's disastrous 1876 Northfield, Minnesota raid), by the time Jessie James and Billy the Kid were gunned down in the early 1880s, many of the conditions that had existed during their heyday were already in decline. The diminution of the real west did not inhibit the creation of a dynamic "Wild West" in the minds of the dime novelists and the reading public. Before and after their deaths, James and The Kid were featured in farfetched exploits ranging from Mexico to the Yukon, fighting Comanche's, Mexican bandits, Texas Rangers, and all manner of ruffians. They rescued maidens, married and fathered children, and alternated ranching and homesteading with their "thrilling adventures." For James in particular, this fanciful life as a roving outlaw all but obliterated memories of his early career as a Civil War guerrilla. He became almost interchangeable with the

much younger Billy the Kid as an icon of the west rather than one associated with the late war.

By the early 20th century several of the remaining guerillas feebly endeavored to cash in on their western fame. Some wrote memoirs or gave speeches, and upon their release from jail, Frank James and Cole Younger attempted to create a Wild West show using the model provided by Buffalo Bill's successful venture. Unlike the more famous version, the Younger-James experiment was a failure, punctuated by accidents, ineptness, and allegations of embezzlement and fraud against the former outlaws. The final evidence of this metamorphosis from wartime to western imagery is shown in films, beginning with 1940s westerns that reflected the dime novel approach to storytelling. Quantrill makes an occasional appearance as a villain and the Civil War gets passing mention, but most of the plots focus on the reluctant and morally torn hero making choices between loyalty to the outlaw band, love for a woman (sometimes portrayed as the wife or sister of Quantrill), or duty to cause or community. While mostly Hollywood hokum, these films represent the ambiguous role that the Civil War played in defining western heroes and villains. Among more modern treatments, the Clint Eastwood classic, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) and Ang Lee's *Ride with the Devil* (1999) stand out as films that pay more than a passing attention to the complexities of the guerrilla war and its effect on the post-war west.

During a final Tony Horwitz-like search for landmarks and graves associated with the guerrilla fighters, the author discovers that not everyone agrees that the legacy of these characters is worth remembering, which in turn threatens the preservation and interpretation of these sites. Noting this ambivalence, he reminds us "that the margins of Civil War history, however unseemly the violence or irregular their recollections, are worth accounting for." (264) In pursuing this quest, Hulbert has produced a readable, nicely illustrated, well-researched study that compliments a growing body of literature on the irregular war in the western borderlands and paves the way for further inquiry.

Bradley Keefer teaches history at Kent State Ashtabula and is the author of Conflicting Memories on the River of Death: The Chickamauga Battlefield in the Spanish-American War, 1863-1933 (KSU Press, 2013).