

The Loyal West: Civil War And Reunion In Middle America

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Review

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Stanley, Matthew E. *The Loyal West: Civil War and Reunion in Middle America*. University of Illinois Press, \$24.93 ISBN 252082249

Restoring the Nation and Reconciling the Past

This book engages a substantial body of scholarship that has emerged in the last quarter century investigating the vexed question of post-Civil War sectional reconciliation. As such, it navigates the currents of scholarly contention presenting this development in far less idealized terms than understood as late as the mid-twentieth century – indeed, as a reconstitution of the nation achieved only with damaging moral compromises and long-term ill effects. Examining the last three decades of the nineteenth century, much of this work gauges collective cultural memory and historical commemoration. Prominently helping to set the current parameters of debate is David W. Blight’s *Race and Reunion* (2001), in which he argues that the national commitment to sectional reconciliation in the late nineteenth century, ultimately, drew on racist impulses at work in both the South and North. No less influential is Caroline E. Janney’s *Remembering the Civil War* (2013), in which she distinguishes “reunion” from “reconciliation” and argues that the latter notion was commonly objectionable to African Americans, who refused to forsake their belief that the Civil War was fundamentally about Emancipation and black equality – and to white southerners, who persisted in advocating the justness of the “Lost Cause.”

Stanley breaks new ground by maintaining that historians such as Blight and Janney, among numerous others, have largely neglected the vitality, variety, and significance of Unionist memory and reunion within discreet regions of the United States. And, as a corrective, he offers a study that deals mostly with the southern halves of Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio – an Ohio River Valley expanse settled initially by upland southerners that he denominates the “Loyal West” and, alternatively, the “Lower Middle West.” Here, Union war veterans who organized into chapters of the Grand Army of the Republic – as well as

politicians, newspaper publishers, local historians, and civic groups – drew on antebellum conceptions of an independent West that included both slaveholding and free states and nurtured deep suspicions of eastern bankers, industrial capitalists, and radical reform agendas. After Fort Sumter, loyal westerners, unlike their counterparts in Kentucky and Missouri, formed a distinctive understanding of the purpose of the Civil War and its enduring significance. The “conservative consciousness” that pervaded the region manifested as a condemnation of southern planters, a commitment to free labor, and a war only to save the Union. This same conservative orientation, of which white supremacy was an integral part, produced an equally vigorous rejection of Radical Reconstruction measures beneficial to the freed people and, ultimately, a calibrated embrace of sectional reunion that led the way to the broader rapprochement of North and South. By 1900, however, congressional leaders, northern capitalists, and advocates for a more industrialized “New South,” along with other makers of popular knowledge, had pushed this relatively unique western development to the edges of national memory to facilitate the widespread acceptance of a seemingly more wholesome “binary” North-South narrative of reconciliation comporting with post Spanish-American War nationalism.

The argument that whiteness and western identity were central to Civil War remembrance among loyal middle westerners and to white political reunion in their region certainly distinguishes *The Loyal West* from other reconciliation studies. Blight argues, after all, that white northerners abandoned the emancipationist legacy of the war as the price for reconciling with former Confederates. By the same token, Stanley’s Union veterans were not generally predisposed to commemorate harmonious relations between black and white veterans. He questions the conclusion Chandra Manning makes in *What This Cruel War Was Over* (2007) that most Union soldiers embraced the idea that the war was both about saving the Union and emancipating the enslaved. He also challenges the argument made by Brian M. Jordan in *Marching Home* (2014) that Union veterans resented the return of white Democrat party dominance in the South because this resurgence sabotaged a prime accomplishment of the war. In Stanley’s words, “Lower Middle Western veterans saw restoration, rather than emancipation, racial integration, or black civil rights, as the war’s true legacy because the preservation of the Union had been their overriding war aim.” (p. 176)

Chapters six and seven, which deal primarily with commemoration and reunion, provide the most intriguing reading and interpretive innovations. As is the case with other chapters, analytical narrative here is rooted deeply in primary sources, which range from manuscript diaries and journals, transcripts of Decoration Day speeches, to political editorials. The voices of loyal westerners come out loud and clear. Stanley provides persuasive discussions of how the longstanding illiberal ideologies uniting the loyal Middle West ultimately translated into rising anxieties about incipient black equality, farmer and labor radicalism, massive immigration from Europe, and the myriad encroachments of urban modernity. All these developments, he shows, helped to spur lower middle-westerners, veterans and civilians alike, to seek reunion – and first with former Confederate westerners south of the Ohio River. One does, however, come away from these chapters wishing to know more about the relationship of the conservative anti-reformism of Lower Middle West Union Army veterans and the work of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and woman suffrage activists in the larger cities of the region, especially Columbus and Cincinnati, Ohio – and the role of Lower Middle West women, church-going, middle-class, and otherwise, in shaping the commemorative ethos and reunion politics of the region.

The Loyal West, overall, constitutes an excellent addition to the growing canon of sectional reconciliation studies. Stanley raises important questions about the cultural, political, and institutional sources of not only sectional reunion but also about the complex processes by which ordinary citizens, partisans, and elites in all regions of the United States jockeyed for position to produce a national identity at a critical juncture in its development. Stanley deserves praise for thoughtfully-rendered findings, indicative of a scholar who is deeply engaged with and excited about his work. Well suited for undergraduate instruction and the graduate seminar room, the *The Loyal West* will also be of interest to professional historians and lay readers interested in the history of the Civil War and its commemoration, and of Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, and New South.

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