

War, Memory, and the 1913 Gettysburg Reunion

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Review

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Flagel, Thomas R. *War, Memory, and the 1913 Gettysburg Reunion*. Kent State University Press, 2019 \$29.95 ISBN: 9781606353714

Black-and-white photographs of former enemies gripping hands across the low, stone fence that rambles down Cemetery Ridge are among the most iconic images of Civil War veterans. Snapped at the fiftieth anniversary reunion in Gettysburg, an event that organizers billed as the “Peace Jubilee,” these disarming scenes came to epitomize the swift exceptionalism of sectional reconciliation in the decades after the Civil War. In 1990, documentarian Ken Burns successfully exploited the emotional power of those photographs—together with sepia-toned newsreel footage of the final reunion of Union and Confederate veterans, held in Gettysburg in 1938—in his nine-part PBS film series. A decade later, historian David W. Blight bookended his history of the Civil War’s place in American memory with scenes from the 1913 reunion. For Blight, what was on display under the Great Tent at Gettysburg was the spectacle of “Blue-Gray fraternalism”—the product of an untoward alliance between white supremacists and “reconciliationists” impatient to put the war behind them. Hardly quaint, nostalgic, or politically unaware, “reunion” had sobering costs. Fifty years after the war that ended slavery, President Woodrow Wilson, a Virginia-born, South Carolina-reared segregationist, declared the late rebellion a “quarrel forgotten.” And, in Blight’s words, “Jim Crow” freely “stalked the dirt paths of the veterans’ tent city.”¹

More recently, historians have questioned just how complete sectional reconciliation was by the war’s semi-centennial. Parsing veterans’ reunion minutes and public rhetoric, efforts to erect monuments and preserve battlefields, electoral politics and the interracial comradeship of the Grand Army of the Republic, this body of scholarship—from the pens of M. Keith Harris, Caroline E. Janney, Barbara A. Gannon, and this reviewer—has revealed how old sectional resentments festered for decades. Photographs of veterans “clasping hands across the bloody chasm” were

¹ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 387.

appealing, but ultimately rather poor representations of reality.² One might reasonably expect Thomas R. Flagel's new book to follow in the path pioneered by these scholars. Instead, he blazes a path of his own, presenting a refreshingly bold and wholly original interpretation of the fiftieth anniversary reunion in Gettysburg. The "purpose of this study," he instructs, "is to shed greater light on how individual veterans viewed the Reunion, what motivated them to attend, how they acted and reacted once they arrived, and whether these survivors found what they were seeking" (xii).

Reaching beneath the reunion's public face and its cloying, oft-quoted speeches, Flagel's book provides the first real, "bottom up" account of what the reunion actually looked and felt like for the veterans themselves, from the moment they departed their hometowns on Gettysburg-bound trains until their return. Here is the sense of anticipation as crowded locomotives lurched toward south-central Pennsylvania; the clatter of vendors hawking souvenirs; the remorseless heat; the layout of the sprawling Tent City; and the attendees' urgent "need to find" and make sense of the past. To convey all of this, Flagel mines a rich array of source material, but he pays special attention to four veterans—two federal and two rebel—who made the trip to Gettysburg.

Flagel excels at documenting the extensive preparations made for the reunion. "Very little was left to chance," he writes, noting in particular the herculean efforts made to supply reunion-goers with fresh drinking water and emergency medical care (37). From meat inspections and concerns over cleanliness to hospital tents and the presence of suffragettes, the author demonstrates as never before how the Gettysburg reunion reflected Progressive Era concerns.

If the goal of the organizers was to stage a national pageant of reconciliation, "the goal among veterans did not involve being actors in a grand gesture of forgiveness between North and South" (61). Instead, they embraced the reunion as an opportunity to revisit personal battlefield landmarks, reconnect with old comrades, swap battle stories, clarify hazy details, and heal the scars of war. They also actively "sought [out] living reminders of their experience" (58). Calling attention to the "disconnects between what veterans did and what officials said," Flagel issues an important reminder of the gap between national narratives and individual memories (92). For Civil

² M. Keith Harris, *Across the Bloody Chasm: The Culture of Commemoration Among Civil War Veterans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014); Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Barbara A. Gannon, *The Won Cause: White and Black Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

War veterans, memory was lived and personal as much as it was cultural and political. Nothing demonstrates this so well as the observation made by one Hoosier journalist on the first day of the reunion: “The big circus tent where governors, generals, judges, bankers, and railroad presidents sat on the stage...was largely ignored by the honored guests, the old soldiers. The graves of ‘Bill’ and ‘Hank’s brother’ and ‘Jake’ were much closer to their hearts” (71).

Too often, our histories read as though Civil War memory was a zero-sum game—men either yielded their principles and embraced their former enemies, or continued to wave the bloody shirt until the bitter end. But Flagel makes clear that wrestling with the meaning of their participation in the war remained urgently paramount, sometimes necessitating cross-sectional fraternization. Our categories and concerns were not always theirs. Very likely, most veteran attendees did not even hear the poorly amplified speeches delivered in the Big Tent; instead, they played their own music, carried on their own conversations, or spent time in the cemetery or on the battlefield. Flagel’s work thus extends that of other recent historians who have paid more attention to soldiers’ inner-most thoughts and emotions. Resisting an older impulse to identify characteristics of *the* “common soldier,” these scholars have emphasized that individuals experienced the war in unique ways.³

Flagel’s book teems with surprising, often overlooked details about one of Civil War memory’s most storied episodes. He concludes that “the Reunion’s most bountiful outcome was its ability to [help veterans] successfully combat loneliness. The isolation in which many lived was temporarily yet profoundly absolved by the encounter of thousands who endured similar experiences, and who longed to form new memories through that intrinsic support.” The exertions of organizers—simple acknowledgment of their service and sacrifices—meant more than “messianic speeches” ever could (129-130). And while its public speeches have come to define the event, veterans “sought and shared stories of survival more than tales of glory” (129).

Based on deep newspaper research and a fair amount of work in original archives, Flagel’s concise and accessible study, prolifically illustrated and spiced with the insights of modern war psychiatrists, is a most welcome addition to the growing literature on Civil War veterans. This gem of a book has managed to say something truly new about Gettysburg and memory. For students of

³ James J. Broomall, *Private Confederacies: The Emotional Worlds of Southern Men as Citizens and Soldiers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Peter S. Carmichael, *The War for the Common Soldier* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

those subjects and for anyone seeking to understand in what it means to survive war, it is required reading.

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