

Confederate Statues and Memorialization

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Review

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Clinton, Catherine, ed. *Confederate Statues and Memorialization*. University of Georgia Press, 2019. Hardcover, \$99.85., ISBN 9780820355559; Paper, \$19.95, ISBN 9780820355573

What a good idea. Editors Catherine Clinton and Jim Downs along with the University of Georgia Press have established a series that will publish books bringing historians' insights to bear on issues of contemporary importance. And what a good topic with which to inaugurate the series, the current debate raging over Confederate statues and memorialization.

The resulting book has three distinct parts. First, it presents a roundtable discussion among five historians who are experts on the memory of the Civil War—Clinton, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Karen L. Cox, Gary W. Gallagher, and Nell Irvin Painter. Second, it reprints what editor Clinton admits are unscientific choices of the “Top Ten Articles” (71) on Confederate memorialization. They include Tony Horwitz’s on the failed attempt in the 1920s to erect a monument to “Mammy” in Washington, D. C.; Kevin Waite’s on the Jefferson Davis Highway; and Deirdre Cooper Owen’s moving reflections on the statue of J. Marion Sims, the pioneering gynecologist who performed his medical research on enslaved women. The other seven articles focus on Confederate monuments. Third, the book provides an extensive bibliography of books, articles, and videos, which includes helpful state-by-state lists of articles on memorials in those states. The book might have benefited from a brief historical essay on the movement to put up the monuments and another on the controversy over taking them down.

Nevertheless, the round table provides much of the basic information on the monuments. The panelists explain when they went up, most of them during the period from the late 1890s to 1920; that, over time, their placement shifted from cemeteries to the center of communities; and that women played a central role in putting up the monuments. Brundage also points to a resurgence in erecting Confederate monuments in the 1990s, a decade in which they went up

primarily on battlefields. Brundage also raises a very important point, too often ignored in contemporary discussions, that the North also erected Civil War monuments. He then makes the case that southerners sought to compete with the North in the war's memorialization.

Many of the reprinted articles are op-eds, and, as one would expect, most take a stand on the issue of whether or not the monuments should come down. One article, reprinted from *Civil War Times*, has brief statements by several people and includes a defense of the monuments. Thos. V. Strain, Jr, of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, sees them as an attempt to honor "the men who fought for the Confederacy during the War Between the States" and condemns the calls to take them down as "an attempt to erase history." (130) Some of the historians, too, worry about erasing history. In the same article, for example, Gary Gallagher writes that "eliminating parts of the memorial landscape is tantamount to destroying documents or images—all compose parts of the historical record and should be interpreted as such." (122) Instead of taking down the monuments, he and several of the historians, advocate adding to existing monuments plaques or other features that would explain their purpose and the war's meaning. Or they call for expanding the memorial landscape by erecting more monuments, to African American leaders and soldiers in particular. In stark contrast, others demand the statues' removal. Historian Megan Kate Nelson writes that they "should be destroyed, and their broken pieces left in situ." (128). Similarly, Ethan J. Kytle and Blain Roberts call for taking down the monuments but leaving their pedestals in place. Kytle and Roberts admit that they had at first thought the monuments should stay up but now support their removal out of respect for how African Americans understandably respond to celebrations of the Confederacy, a point others make as well.

Unlike the authors of the reprinted articles, the panelists do not focus on the question of what to do with the statues but wisely raise more fundamental issues. They maintain, in Clinton's words, that "statues and memorials tell us more about those who create these commemorations than they do about those being honored." (7) In other words, memorialization, monuments, and historical memory in general reflect the attitudes of people in the present, who act from contemporary concerns and their vision of what is good for society. That is certainly true; however, the relationship between the past and memory may be more complex than that, especially in the case of Civil War monuments. That the North as well as the South erected monuments was not just the result of sectional competition but a common need to understand the

past, to try to make sense of and bring meaning to the war's carnage and enormous death toll, a theme developed with great insight in Charles Royster's *The Destructive War*.

Some of the panelists also make a strong case that a statue should not be treated like a historical document. Brundage, who so often here raises a salient point, argues "we, as a society, should have the choice to alter our public space, especially our most important civic spaces, to reflect who we are at any given moment." (45) Communities should ask, he explains, how a monument functions at any given time and strive to create a memorial landscape that addresses society's current beliefs and needs. And in reaching such a determination, Cox adds, the entire community should be included in the process.

The panelists want the resulting public discussion over Civil War memorialization to lead to a more profound understanding of what the war means. Many people have still not accepted the centrality of slavery to the Civil War. And, as Painter points out, Americans need to confront the larger issue of the role of slavery in American society, which inevitably must involve reevaluating the way it, too, is memorialized. Embedded in discussions of slavery and the Civil War, as David Blight's article argues, are attitudes about race and its role in American society today.

The debate over Confederate memorialization, in which the panelists proudly maintain, historians have played a very public role, continues. Some monuments have come down, most remain up, and no consensus has emerged about what to do. The majority of Americans, at least according to 2017 polls, think Confederate monuments should remain in place, although these polls also show a decided racial and even more dramatic partisan divide on the question. If widely read, *Confederate Statues and Memorialization* can play an important role in shaping public discussions of Confederate memorialization. One can only hope that the continuing public debate will lead to the deeper understanding of the Civil War, slavery, and the role of race in American society that the book's panelists hope to promote.

Gaines M. Foster teaches history at Louisiana State University. His latest attempt to deal with Civil War memory is "Today's Battle over the Confederate Flag Has Nothing to Do with History," at <https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2018/10/23/todays-battle-confederate-flag-nothing-civil-war/ideas/essay/>