

Civil War Monuments and the Militarization of America

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Review

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Brown, Thomas J. *Civil War Monuments and the Militarization of America*. Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Paperback, \$29.95, ISBN: 978-1-4696-5374; Hardback, \$90.00, ISBN: 978-1-4696-5373-0. Pp. 384.

“The Civil War monuments installed by communities across the North and South from the 1860s into the 1930s” (1), Thomas J. Brown argues in his fascinating new book, served as “exemplars of a robust, disciplined citizenry” (2). They symbolized the “soldier’s replacement of the farmer as the paradigmatic American citizen,” “created a social metaphor conducive to Gilded Age reinforcement of class and racial hierarchy” (6), and thereby “transformed the civil landscape and the place of the military in national life “(1).

Brown’s book rests on exhaustive research and displays an intimidating erudition; Brown draws on extensive knowledge both of the history of statuary across centuries and of American literature and culture. At times, however, his command of the material becomes a trifle distracting; in places, the book could have benefited from a little less detail. In one instance, though, a little more information would have been helpful, a chart or table that compiled the quantitative data on statues to which the text often refers. Such minor faults aside, however, Brown has written an impressive, important book that everyone interested in the Civil War’s impact, Civil War memory, or the current debate over Confederate statues should read and ponder.

Many people in that debate do not think the North has many Civil War monuments and will be surprised that Brown looks more at northern than southern monuments. He argues that “the divide between North and South is less fundamental than the transformation that reached both sides. Union and Confederate remembrance differed in important ways, but the twinned development of evolutionary ideology and militarism shaped monuments across the country” (9). Other readers might be surprised by the variety of memorials he analyzes--memorial halls, victorious arches, as well as a variety of monument designs. He devotes more attention to

statues crafted by individual artists than to the prototypical mass-produced Confederate and Union soldiers.

Early memorials, particularly in the North, honored the dead and often compiled their names. Monuments sometimes had funeral designs and cemetery locations, but, particularly in New England, which led in the erection of monuments, they went up in towns and featured either a “mourning and meditating soldier, the picket,” or “the guard at the bivouac of the dead” (49). By the mid-1870s, the “grip of the Civil War dead on the public imagination loosened” (55). Beginning in the North in the 1880s and later in the South, monuments to the common soldier honored not just those who died but all who had served. The soldier at parade rest became the iconic pose, but other monuments featured flag bearers, soldiers with their rifles in a combat pose, or even combat groups. In the South, Brown argues, putting these monuments on the courthouse lawn tied them to the social and racial order. Northern monuments, too, linked citizenship to whiteness and, as immigration increased, ethnic purity. The central theme of Civil War monuments, however, remained discipline and martial values. “Subordination was the heart of patriotism” (86).

Along with those to the common soldier monuments, Brown analyses monuments to the war’s leaders. He includes an intriguing discussion of the changing portraits of Abraham Lincoln, early as the emancipator later as an orator and, in his monument on the Washington Mall, as an intellectual. Monuments most often went up not to public leaders like Lincoln, though, but to the generals of both North and South. In the early years after the war, their statues often celebrated a democratic leadership of “egalitarian interaction” and “shared risk,” but over time they more often evoked the devotion of their troops and took a posture of review, which “redefined leadership as an act of supervision rather than an act of representation” (163). The creation of magnificent, often mounted, statues to officers, particularly if juxtaposed with the soldiers’ monuments, reaffirmed the theme of subordination and hierarchy at the heart of the monument movement.

Brown also discusses the theme of victory, in the North particularly in the erection of memorial arches, but also in southern monuments, especially the Jefferson Davis monument in Richmond. He attributes the South’s sense of victory to a celebration of its valor and “the reconstruction of white supremacy through disfranchisement segregation, convict leasing and lynching,” (208) although he asserts that tie more than he demonstrates it. He also argues that the

South's celebration of valor allowed a "concurrent postwar loyalty to the Confederacy and the United States" (209), an insightful observation that the white South's patriotic behavior across the twentieth century confirms. By the mid-1920s, Brown argues, World War I had replaced the Civil War as the focus of public memorialization. Civil War monuments, with their "Idealization of belligerent masculinity" (255), shaped the way in which Americans memorialized the World War, which further contributed to the militarization of American society and the centrality of the soldier to citizenship.

Brown makes a convincing case for the role of Civil War monuments in the militarization of America. They did so within the context of a social vision at the heart of the larger cultural phenomenon of Civil War memory. Brown's book deepens an appreciation of that memory even as it fosters a better understanding of not just Civil War monuments but public memorialization in a democratic society.

Gaines M. Foster, Louisiana State University, teaches a course on Civil War memory, which he continues to explore in his scholarship.