

The False Cause: Fraud, Fabrication, and White Supremacy in Confederate Memory

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Review

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Domby, Adam H. *The False Cause: Fraud, Fabrication, and White Supremacy in Confederate Memory*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020. Cloth, \$29.95, ISBN 9780813943763. Pp. 272

A historian on a mission, Adam H. Domby seeks to expose how “white supremacy, fraud, and fabricated memories have fundamentally shaped how Americans, especially white southerners, recalled the past.” He explains how the Lost Cause, or *The False Cause*, to use the book’s wonderful title, made states’ rights not slavery the cause of the war, ignored the significant dissent in the Confederacy, exaggerated the “military prowess of Confederate soldiers,” made slavery seem benign, and ignored the “role of racism in American history.” At the beginning of the twentieth century, he concludes, “a Lost Cause narrative celebrating white supremacy became a crucial rhetorical tool...to justify segregation, disfranchisement, and racial discrimination.” (3) Domby fiercely and fearlessly develops his argument, using North Carolina as his example. He does so by looking at three interrelated topics: monuments and the memory of the war, Confederate soldiers’ pensions, and pensions for African Americans.

In an opening chapter on Confederate monuments, Domby draws heavily on the horrendous, racist speech of Julian Shakespeare Carr at the unveiling of the Confederate monument on the University of North Carolina campus. In his speech, Carr celebrated Confederate veterans’ role in overcoming Reconstruction and graphically described his savage beating of an African American woman right after the war. Domby had found Carr’s speech in the archives and was a graduate student in Chapel Hill when that monument came down, events that eventually led him to write this book. “Silent Sam,” as the UNC monument had come to be called, and other Confederate monuments, Domby argues, sought to perpetuate white supremacy; they and the Lost Cause of which they were a part “helped maintain undemocratic one-party control of the South by providing a historical narrative that justified violence and oppression and fostered a white identity.” (4)

The larger Lost Cause, he continues, propagated three main “lies,” a term he uses often: that the “cause was noble and just and the war fundamentally about states’ rights not slavery,” that “slavery was benevolent and the slaves content,” and that the South lost only due “to overwhelming numbers and resources.” (4) Almost every history of the Lost Cause has challenged the validity of at least the first two of those three Lost Cause interpretations of the war.

Domby goes further, however. In what is the best part of the book, he challenges another aspect of the white southern memory of the war, the idea of a white South united behind the cause. He does an excellent job discussing the strength of Unionism in North Carolina and the presence of dissent throughout the war. He also has a thorough discussion of what it meant that the Confederacy needed to draft soldiers and that many who served deserted. Exposing and emphasizing the extent of dissent and desertion reveals a far from united South. Domby even questions how well and how hard Confederate soldiers fought. He adds that “the fact that it took the United States just four years to crush a rebellion that spanned nearly half a continent seems remarkably quick.” (71) Some military historians would agree, but many others would question that conclusion. The case against the Confederate military effort seems less well-developed and convincing than that against Confederate unity and white southerners’ willingness to sacrifice for the cause.

In the second major part of the book, Domby discusses the Confederate pension system in North Carolina. He finds it to be an important part of the Lost Cause, one that, of course, contributes to the maintenance of white supremacy. The state ignored “pension fraud,” which he says may have been as high as 20 percent, and celebrated “pensioners as model citizens” which “helped impart the Lost Cause to future generations in subtler way than monuments and speeches. In a cyclic manner, pension fraud served to reinforce the Lost Cause narrative by creating a memory of near unanimity and unflagging support for the Confederacy.” (103).

In the third part, Domby discusses a lesser-known aspect of the Lost Cause. In the 1920s, North Carolina, and four other former Confederate states, provided a pension, smaller than that for Confederate soldiers, “for free people of color and ex-slaves who had worked for the Confederacy” during the war (105). “What began as a celebration of the slaves’ loyalty to their masters became a memory of slaves devoted to the Confederacy before evolving into myths about slaves actively fighting for the Confederacy” (104). Domby then goes on to debunk the

idea, now popular among neo-Confederates, that there had been black Confederates. He also adds a useful discussion of Confederate atrocities against African Americans, something else that the Lost Cause has denied or at least ignored.

Domby provides the most extensive discussion of the role of white supremacy in the Lost Cause that we have. The idea itself will be familiar to anyone who has read David Blight's *Race and Reunion*, which called the dominant memory of the war the white supremacist vision, or to anyone who has followed recent debates over Confederate statues. Domby's more important contribution may be his thorough critique of the idea of a united South along with his discussion of the Confederate pension system and pensions for African Americans. He certainly succeeds in his primary goal, exposing the falsehoods in the Lost Cause narrative of the war in hopes of creating a more accurate public understanding of the Civil War memory. Domby thereby makes an important contribution to current public debates over that history and the continued use of Confederate symbols.

His book's contribution to a fuller understanding of the nature and function of Civil War memory seem less certain. In developing his rigorous critique of the Lost Cause, Domby uses lies, falsehoods, and fabrications, words not often employed in studies of historical memory. It will be interesting to see if that practice spreads. The terms serve an important function, but they may also make the role of memory a little more conscious and manipulative than it may be. Early in the book, Domby acknowledges that there "was more to the Lost Cause than lies and white supremacy." Other "factors contributed to its formation, including the trauma of a destructive war, gender relations, and battlefield events" (10-11). Paying more attention to these and other factors, along with exploring how memory functioned in the North not just the South, will provide broader meaning to the nature and role of Civil War memory. In his recent study of Civil War monuments, Thomas Brown shows that Civil War memory functioned not just to support white supremacy but even more to promote a rigid social order and a militarized society. Understanding the broader forces that shaped Civil War memory and its wider social functions may in the end help explain why the white supremacy fundamental to the Lost Cause proved so pervasive and persistent in American society.

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