

Lost Causes: Confederate Demobilization and the Making of Veteran Identity

Tracy L. Barnett

University of Georgia, tracy.barnett@uga.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Barnett, Tracy L. (2022) "Lost Causes: Confederate Demobilization and the Making of Veteran Identity," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.4.08

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss4/8>

Review

Barnett, Tracy L.

Clampitt, Bradley R. *Lost Causes: Confederate Demobilization and the Making of Veteran Identity*. Louisiana State University Press, 2022. Hardcover. \$50.00 ISBN 9780807177167 pp. 344.

During the spring and summer of 1865, Confederate soldiers faced new challenges: surrender, demobilization, and the long march home. In *Lost Causes: Confederate Demobilization and the Making of Veteran Identity*, Bradley R. Clampitt explores the mechanics of military demobilization as well as the mindset of southern soldiers. A fleeting interlude between soldiering's conclusion and the commencement of the veteran experience, this particular moment occupied a critical juncture in these men's emotional lives that remains an understudied and underappreciated aspect of Civil War historiography.

The first of five chapters, "Rebels Resolute: The Mind of Johnny Reb Upon Surrender," addresses the oftentimes complex and ambivalent emotional experience of surrender and defeat for men still in the ranks. Rather than offer a succinct thesis, Clampitt notes common themes. He claims that surrender came as a surprise for many men fighting in General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Yet many Confederates fully understood the significance of Lee's surrender at Appomattox: The war was over. A minority, however, remained resolute. The fall of Richmond, the surrender of General Joseph E. Johnston, and the capture of President Jefferson Davis generally dashed the hopes of even the most committed Confederates. After admitting defeat, men faced a range of emotions: anger, grief, humiliation, and even relief. Indeed, Clampitt's findings largely build from and support James J. Broomall's *Private Confederacies: The Emotional Worlds of Southern Men as Citizens and Soldiers* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019) and Jason Phillips's *Diehard Rebels: The Confederate Culture of Invincibility* (University of Georgia Press, 2007). Furthermore, Clampitt finds "remarkable consistency between wartime and postwar perceptions" (26). Postwar accounts often used collective language ("we" rather than "I"), but nevertheless expressed similar sentiments.

"Yankees and Rebels: The System of Confederate Demobilization" traces the process of parole and military demobilization. While procedure certainly varied across the South, the

surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia, Clampitt argues, provided a general blueprint for the terms of capitulation. Learning from the initial surrender, Generals Joseph E. Johnston and Ulysses S. Grant, as well as Union and Confederate officers, further perfected and organized a system of demobilization. After distributing parole documents, Union officers often issued rations and permitted paroled Confederates to use government-operated railroads. In other cases, southerners made their way home on foot or horseback. Those released from Northern prisons often traveled along coastal waterways. The system, notes Clampitt, inevitably broke down for myriad reasons. Confederates, in particular, felt powerless against “Yankee rule” and feared retaliation for the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln (69). Unsurprisingly, unfriendly interactions also occurred between Confederates and Black Union troops.

Following Confederates’ homeward journeys, “Rebels and Rebels: When Johnny Reb Came Marching Home” considers the privations and threats experienced by traveling Confederates. Most soldiers, Clampitt finds, traveled in small groups, which were “numerous enough to provide security but few enough to facilitate the gathering of adequate provisions from farms along the way” (10). Southern civilians, including African Americans, often assisted soldiers by providing food, water, or shelter.

“Every Rebel for Himself: The Lawless Summer of 1865” explores the violence and chaos of the postwar South. “A clear pattern emerged to explain the chaos,” Clampitt argues, “Two factors—the timing of demobilized Confederates passing through a region and the presence or absence of Federal troops—almost always determined the extent of disorder” (11). Proceeding east-west, the chaos started in Richmond, Virginia, soon after Lee’s surrender. As Western troops surrendered and disbanded members of the Army of Northern Virginia moved westward, major transportation routes in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia devolved into lawlessness. The Trans-Mississippi Theatre, Clampitt argues, endured the worst devastation, while the eastern half of Texas “set the unenviable standard for lawlessness” (11). In wartime and postwar accounts, soldiers justified their plundering, theft, and destruction. Their Confederate service and wartime sacrifices, they reasoned, entitled them to take government and civilian property. In a less convincing section, Clampitt compares Confederate demobilization with twentieth-century conflicts.

The final chapter, “Rebels Reunited: Homecoming, Rebirth, and Redemption,” investigates men’s homecoming. Perhaps considering their homecomings too personal, many

Confederates chose to omit this moment from their wartime and postwar accounts. Those who did relate the event depicted a range of experiences. For some it was a moment of long-delayed jubilation while others, after years of conflict, were unrecognizable to their family and friends. Despite differing accounts and experiences, Clampitt identifies three main concerns faced by Confederates: “immediate short-term economic survival; the rapidly evolving place of freed slaves in southern society; and postwar life under ‘Yankee rule’” (167). Despite their fears, Confederate veterans acted swiftly to consolidate their power and organize resistance.

Using a sample size similar to James McPherson’s *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1997), Clampitt’s conclusions are based on roughly 400 manuscript collections and 700 questionnaires, which were collected from Tennessee veterans. Unlike some scholarship on Civil War soldiers and veterans, Clampitt carefully considers the experiences of men who served in each conflict zone, with an emphasis on the Western and Trans-Mississippi Theaters. The appendix identifies 200 men with complete travel itineraries; these Confederates traveled an average of 586 miles to reach home.

While narrow in periodization, the work is ambitious in scope and, at times, Clampitt is only able to offer broad themes rather than precise analysis. Nevertheless, this exploration of the Confederate experience in the spring and summer of 1865 is a welcome addition to the field. In short, Bradley R. Clampitt’s *Lost Causes: Confederate Demobilization and the Making of Veteran Identity* sheds light on the Confederate mindset and details the on-the-ground process of southern demobilization.

Tracy L. Barnett is a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia. Her dissertation analyzes the historic origins of America’s gun culture and its mutually constitutive relationship to white supremacist ideology. Her scholarship has been published in *Civil War History*, the *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, and *The Washington Post*.