

Hearts Torn Asunder: Trauma in the Civil War's Final Campaign in North Carolina

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Review

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Civil War historians well know that the conflict did not end when Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant shook hands at Appomattox Court House. Confederate forces continued to resist for several weeks until they received the news about Richmond's fall and the surrender of Lee's army. In *Hearts Torn Asunder: Trauma in the Civil War's Final Campaign in North Carolina*, Ernest A. Dollar, Jr., provides a fresh look at perhaps the war's most significant remaining theater after Appomattox, where ninety-thousand Union soldiers under William T. Sherman pursued Joseph E. Johnston's thirty thousand beleaguered Confederates. While the book presents an account of the campaign, Dollar—himself a veteran—focuses mainly on the war's impact on the men who fought, and on the civilians caught between the two armies.

The work opens with chapters describing the conditions of the Union and Confederate troops and of North Carolina's population at the start of the campaign, followed by a day-to-day survey of its progress from April 10 through May 4, 1865. The armies seldom confronted each other through these weeks, as Johnston's men persistently retreated from Sherman's superior force. Once he learned about Lee's surrender, Johnston persuaded Confederate President Jefferson Davis—passing through North Carolina as he fled from Richmond—that “it would be the greatest of human crimes for us to attempt to continue” (77). The Confederate commander thus met with Sherman at James and Nancy Bennett's farmhouse and agreed to surrender all of the South's remaining armies after Sherman offered to grant the soldiers full amnesty and restoration of their constitutional rights. With the Northern public furious after Abraham Lincoln's assassination, President Andrew Johnson's cabinet rejected Sherman's generosity, forcing the humiliated Union general to meet Johnston a second time and impose on his opponent the same terms that Grant had bestowed on Lee. As the Confederate army dissolved and the Union army prepared for its grand review in Washington, Johnston lay the groundwork for defending himself against charges of cowardice and betrayal for surrendering his army.

Sherman likewise sought vindication from Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton's scathing public criticism and challenge to his patriotism because of his lenient first agreement at Bennett House.

The armies' presence meanwhile terrified North Carolina civilians. Many expected to suffer the same degree of destruction that Sherman's hardened veterans had recently inflicted on South Carolina, but they also feared deprivations from the desperate Confederates who were supposed to be defending them. Soldiers from both armies ransacked several communities in their path. Union commanders actually tried to limit "hard war" in the area, but "the army's psychological state overwhelmed Sherman's control over it" (21). Despite his promise to spare the city of Raleigh, Sherman could not prevent his men from breaking into private homes in the state capital. Union "bummers" frequently went beyond foraging to harass and, in some cases, sexually abuse individual Southerners, while famished Confederates looted and stole food and committed similar atrocities that "destroyed home front morale" (36). Bitter memories of the men's behavior, Dollar contends, help to explain post-war Americans' neglect of the campaign. Southerners embraced the mythology of the "Lost Cause" because "it provided solace to generations of traumatized people," while for Northerners, "talking about the end of the war in North Carolina ... required talking about an inglorious campaign that saw war made on civilians" (190).

Dollar finds in the soldiers' conduct ample evidence for widespread cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). "[T]he physical and emotional damage of wartime stress," he concludes, contributed significantly to the campaign's viciousness. "By 1865, soldiers who suffered four years of toxic stress found their abilities to think rationally and to make moral judgments difficult" (xxi-xxii). Most soldiers refrained from extreme cruelties, but their experiences nevertheless affected them deeply. Some found comfort in religion, which offered "a balm for souls troubled by sins they and others had committed" (24). More found refuge in alcohol, probably self-medicating with a remedy that only further impaired their moral restraint. As the war neared its end, many felt a deep sense of melancholy. Soldiers looked forward to returning home, but they lamented their dead comrades and recognized that they would soon lose the friendships and camaraderie that had carried them through the conflict. Some realized, too, that fighting had given them a distinct perspective that separated them from family and friends, who remained "largely ignorant of the realities of war" (xxiii). Many never came to peace with what they had seen and done. Alcohol and opiate abuse became widespread among veterans, with several eventually institutionalized or ending their misery by suicide.

Hearts Torn Asunder is filled with stories showing civilians' hardships and soldiers' bizarre or brutal behavior. Dollar unfortunately does not attempt to locate his findings in the historiographical literature. As a result, the book fails to address historians who argue that PTSD affected only a small number of soldiers, and that relatively few committed atrocities against civilians. The author's presumption that the North Carolina campaign reached a greater level of cruelty than elsewhere likewise remains questionable. Surprisingly, too, the book says relatively little about race. To be sure, African Americans are present: An appendix presents two poems composed spontaneously by George Moses Horton, a slave who escaped from a nearby plantation; North Carolinians held a longstanding fear of slave rebellion; and at least one Union soldier considered the war divine chastisement for the national sin of slavery. When considering Southern fears of "a future full of horrors" following the Confederacy's defeat, though, the author misses an opportunity to explore to what degree those "horrors" arose from their recognition that slavery would no longer govern race relations (110). Still, *Hearts Torn Asunder* is a worthwhile read. The war may or may not have left a generation of Americans "more troubled than we have thought," but Dollar's research will quickly disabuse readers tempted to view the Civil War as a romantic or heroic crusade (xxvii).

Jonathan M. Atkins is professor of History at Berry College. He is the author of Parties, Politics, and the Sectional Conflict in Tennessee, 1832-1861 (1997) and is currently working on a biography of Andrew Jackson.