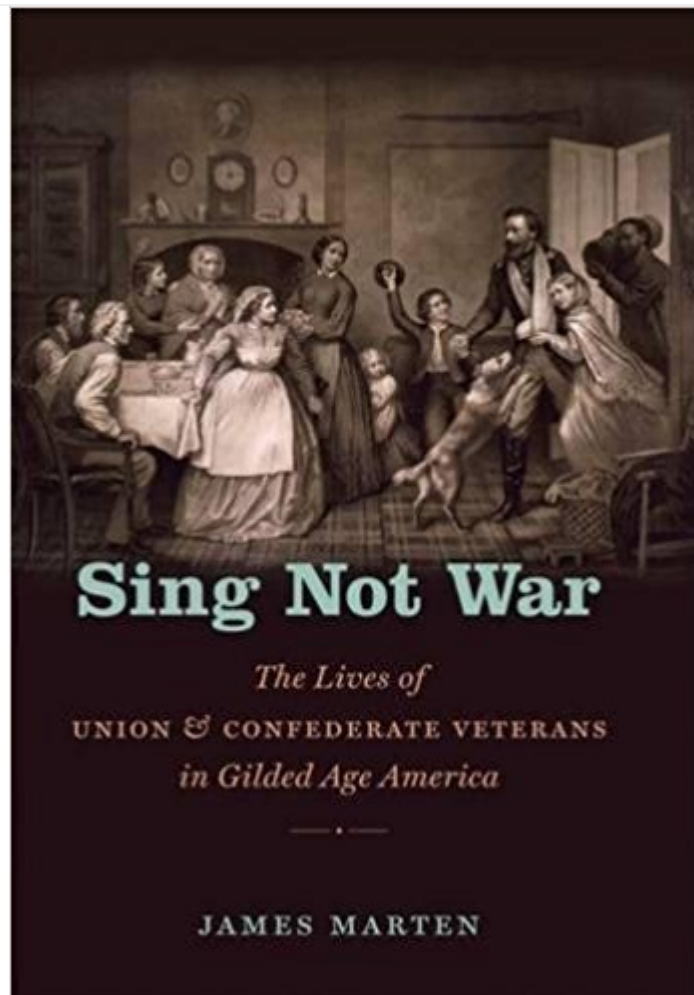


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Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America



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Reviewed Work(s)

Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America. By James Marten (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). Pp. 352. Cloth, \$39.95.

The field of Civil War history contains many different threads and avenues for scholarly research. Numerous historians have focused their attention on the war's origins, the conflict itself, and the years of Reconstruction that followed. James Marten's *Sing Not War* falls into the last chronological period, picking up as the war ends and concluding around the turn of the twentieth century. Rather than looking to the political issues of Reconstruction, Marten focuses on a more immediate issue: the return of the multitude of Union and Confederate soldiers to their homes.

Throughout his book, the author notes that not all veterans had similar experiences. Many, if not most, soldiers returned home and were able to fit back into civilian life, while others, often with mental or physical disabilities, found this transition more difficult. Although describing soldiers' process of reintegration into society is part of the goal of this book, Marten also looks at this situation from the perspective of nonveteran civilians. He argues that "Civil War veterans were set apart, and the specific ways in which this process took place encompass subsets of the larger, distinct group of old soldiers" (5). In order to fully explore how this separation occurred, Marten expands the scope of his book to encompass the rest of the nineteenth century, showing how the lives of veterans and civilians' views of these veterans developed over the decades following the Civil War.

Not relying solely on his own research, Marten's book is steeped in the relevant literature on this subject. As he tackles a rather large topic—Civil War veterans' experiences in the decades after the war—he frequently notes the research of other historians of this period to fill in some of the details that his own research did not address. For example, the author agrees with Drew Gilpin Faust's argument that by instituting a draft the federal government accepted responsibilities for its soldiers. He

also cites Elna Green's evidence that Confederate veterans were supported so they might exemplify masculinity in their communities and details George M. Fredrickson's research on how battlefield experiences permanently separated soldiers and civilians.[1] Thus, the book sometimes reads more as a synthesis of Civil War scholarship than a research-based monograph.

However, despite the arguments and evidence cited from other authors, Marten does add to the field. Although his topic may appear broad, the author narrows his focus to look at white Civil War veterans, and focuses most on Union soldiers who found the return to their prewar lives difficult. He notes that many Civil War historians writing on the combatants rely heavily on the innumerable soldiers' letters available in archives around the country. These sources are less helpful in the postwar period, however, since veterans either stopped writing or wrote primarily about their wartime experiences. The lack of letters commenting on the difficulties of civilian life could be seen as an indication of a smooth transition to peacetime society (10). Marten avoids this conclusion by utilizing largely unused sources, such as congressional investigations of soldiers' homes and various soldiers' newspapers, which provide evidence that not all veterans found life easy after the war. In providing this alternate view of Civil War veteran life, Marten cites Eric Dean's study on the difficulty of Indiana soldiers reentering society after the Civil War, one of the few other works to describe a similar postwar experience for veterans.[2]

Throughout the book's six chapters a general narrative is discernable, encompassing the lives of many veterans. After returning home, soldiers often found a gulf forming between themselves and nonveterans, who did not experience the same horrors of war. In many cases, there was a disconnect between society's gratitude for these men's service and the ways soldiers were treated and cared for after the war. Marten describes soldiers' homes and pension systems to show how both became increasingly complicated issues. During this same time, veterans' organizations became important players on the political scene as the government decided whether to care for disabled veterans only or all men who fought. Americans, most of whom did not share the same experiences as veterans, constructed conflicting stereotypes with which to understand old soldiers. In the end, many veterans fell into the

stereotypes, both negative and positive, set up by civilians. For example, some soldiers, particularly in the South, tried to fill central roles in their communities, as expected by their neighbors. At the same time, many more old soldiers also turned to alcoholism and fulfilled other civilians' expectations that these men would contribute nothing to the community but would rather be a burden on the state. Also running through the book is the idea of manhood, often set up as a goal, particularly for Confederate soldiers coming home to ravaged towns. Veterans faced an uncertain time, as manhood increasingly became defined by economic success. Ultimately, Marten argues "the tension between the need to forget and the need to remember symbolized the conflict between veterans and civilians" (285).

Sing Not War is a well-written book chronicling the difficulties and complexities of veteran life in the decades following Appomattox. There is much to praise in the author's thoroughness and clarity. Although Marten focuses on such a broad topic, he is able to state his points strongly by providing numerous examples of how the general themes and threads of postwar life affected individual veterans. He also chooses anecdotes that not only provide a personal element to the larger events at work, but he also finds accounts of soldiers from all over the North and South, which is evident in his extensive primary source bibliography. In addition, for each of the complicated issues he discusses, such as the pension system, the author explores public perceptions, federal actions, and perspectives of veterans and veterans' organizations like the Grand Army of the Republic. Marten also places his book in context by hinting at how the issues surrounding Civil War veterans set the scene for later events. For example, after describing the federal government's involvement in soldiers' homes, he notes that this was an early case of the state focusing on social problems.

There are, however, a few minor issues in the book. First, the breadth of the subject matter requires the author to generalize reactions and experiences to some extent. For the most part this is done well, but there are several sections where it is difficult to ascertain whether the book is discussing all veterans or only those from either the North or the South. Since Marten switches between comparing and contrasting the experiences of veterans from both sides after the war, it would be helpful if this was done more carefully. Another issue is the lack of distinction

between soldiers and sailors. The author lumps these two groups together and only on one or two occasions mentions how their experiences may have been different. If both soldiers and sailors fared similarly after the war, a note about this would be useful.

Ultimately, Marten provides an excellent study of the life of Civil War veterans and how they were viewed in the decades following the war. Historians of the Civil War and the Gilded Age will find this book an excellent addition to their fields.

John Laaman

Auburn University

[1] Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2008); Elna C. Green, “Protecting Confederate Soldiers and Mothers: Pensions, Gender, and the Welfare State in the U.S. South, a Case Study from Florida,” *Journal of Social History* 39, No. 4 (Summer 2006): 1078-1104; George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

[2] Eric T. Dean, Jr., *Shook over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).



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