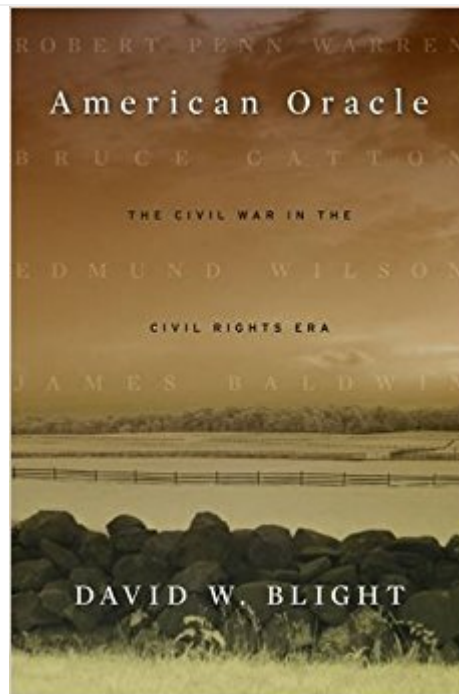


# {essays in history}

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## American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era.* By David W. Blight (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Pp. 328. Cloth, \$27.95.

David Blight helped propel the field of Civil War memory into prominence with his 2001 *Race and Reunion*. The book chronicled the various strains of popular interpretations of the war that emerged in the late nineteenth century, from a “reconciliationist” narrative that emphasized sentimental reunion via recognition of the mutual valor of white soldiers on both sides, to an “emancipationist” construct that stressed the centrality of slavery and racism in the war’s causes and advocated racial equality as the true fulfillment of the war’s legacy.<sup>[i]</sup> In more recent years, scholars such as Jon Wiener and Robert J. Cook have extended analysis of the conflict between rival narratives over the origins and meanings of the Civil War into the twentieth century. Wiener and Cook examined the contrast in the late 1950s and 1960s between the official Civil War Centennial, filled with battle reenactments and other displays of Cold War-era patriotic sentimentality, and the Civil Rights Movement, which called for the achievement of the “new birth of freedom” that Lincoln had trumpeted.<sup>[ii]</sup>

Blight’s newest work, *American Oracle*, redefines our understanding of Civil War memory during the Centennial by turning from the “institutions” and “popular culture” of the time and towards the “serious literature and historical narrative” of the era (28). The Yale scholar takes as his subject the four influential American writers of the 1950s and 1960s who perhaps showed the deepest interest in interpreting the war and its legacies: Robert Penn Warren, Bruce Catton, Edmund Wilson, and James Baldwin. Through his examination of the letters, oral reminiscences, and published fictional and nonfictional works of the four men, Blight attempts to demonstrate the centrality of Civil War memory in their lives and writings. Moreover, by exploring how “American writers and readers were searching for the meaning of their history during the Centennial commemoration” (3), Blight aims to further understand the strains in American memory regarding the “place of the Civil War in the ever-evolving master narrative of American history,” both at the Centennial and in the modern era of the Sesquicentennial (28). Towards these ends, Blight organizes his narrative into four sections, each of which focuses on a different writer.

The first author whom Blight connects to Civil War memory is Warren. Blight deftly weaves together Warren’s reminiscences and works to

illustrate the long shadow that the Civil War cast over the writer. Warren was a Kentuckian weaned on the pro-Confederate stories of his veteran grandfather who, though he spent his adult career trying to overcome the sentimentalist “worldview of his youth,” nonetheless felt the “draw of the Civil War as America’s most pivotal and symbolic event” (9, 46). In works such as the political novel *All the King’s Men* and the Civil War story *Wilderness*, Warren detailed how Americans fought the “inevitability” of history by crafting myths about the arc of history, centered on a Civil War replete with “mesmerizing sentimentality” (51). Perhaps the strongest passages in the work come when Blight explains the two narratives of “self-righteousness”—the “Great Alibi” and the “Treasury of Virtue”—which Warren respectively ascribed to the North and South in his meditation *The Legacy of the Civil War* (65-69). As Blight convincingly shows, Warren considered one of his prime purposes as a writer to be replacing such sentimental constructs with a redemptive one, in which a “half-attentive...American public” would realize that the true meaning of the war lay in its dark “gravitas,” and that the “pity and terror” of the war could instruct them in confronting the war’s unresolved racial outcomes (51-52, 77). Warren thus recognized that the Civil Rights Movement, and not the official Centennial, was the true heir of the war’s legacies.

Blight’s next subject, the journalist and popular historian Catton, proves a more elusive quarry. Catton grew up in Michigan with the stories of Union veterans, from whom he derived an optimistic picture of an era filled with “epic” and “romance” (82). With his boyhood acquaintances in mind, Catton detailed stories of “young heroes fighting for what they considered right” in an impressive list of books, from *A Stillness at Appomattox* to *Never Call Retreat* (104). In perhaps the weakest section of the book, Blight lays out the contradictions and ambiguities in the writer’s views. Catton was a firm reconciliationist, who “insisted that Civil War memory should unite the country” with a vision of a nation emerging “better and stronger” from a spate of mutual “bloodletting” (103-111). Thus, rather than confront the racial side of the war as Warren did, Catton sidestepped such “moral ambiguities” by portraying the war as “essentially an unfathomable *mystery*” (97-98). Yet Blight also details how Catton attempted to be a “scholar of race,” emphasizing that slavery caused the war and supporting Civil Rights in his own time (114-115). Blight thus crafts a portrait of a conflicted man. Unfortunately,

however, he does not unravel such conflicts to provide us with a cohesive understanding of Catton.

The views of the last two authors Blight covers, the white literary critic and antiwar activist Wilson and the African-American writer and Civil Rights proponent Baldwin, come across with more clarity. Wilson's experience in the hospital corps in World War I convinced the New Jerseyan of the senseless horrors of war and helped produce his interest in rendering the national myth of the Civil War "base" (135). Wilson also came to develop a fascination with the connections between "history and literature"—in trying to see if history had a "discernable design" that writers could help shape (131, 140). In his 1961 chronicle of Civil War-era writers, *Patriotic Gore*, Wilson thus combined these two strains, attempting to expose the cruel realities of a "romanticized" war through the "unique literature crafted by its participants" (145). Yet his quest to make Americans "face" the war by revealing the "serious cultural stamp" that it had left on the country ran up against his fascination with the phenomenon he claimed to despise—myth—as Wilson ignored the racial aspects of the war and its legacies, and even at times championed the Lost Cause (145, 153-155). Baldwin more consistently attacked the reconciliationist ethos of the Centennial from a different angle. The homosexual black writer from Harlem came to see the memory of the Civil War as a "battle against fear and rejection" analogous to the struggles he faced in his own life (187). For Baldwin, emancipation was a "central result" of the Civil War era that, because of sentimental reunion, was an unfinished project (187). In works like *Nobody Knows My Name* and *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin thus engaged on a "redemptive quest" to make readers "wake up" and recognize the past, and thereby "try to imagine a new future" (206-207). Thus, as did all the writers discussed above, Baldwin grappled with narratives of reconciliation and emancipation in a largely unique way.

Given the ambitious scope of his attempts to relate the entire lives and writings of four prominent authors to the complex strands of Civil War memory, Blight at times obscures the central ideas that make his work important. He does show an interest in the notion of tragedy in Civil War memory, going so far as to engage in an extended definition of the term in his prologue (22-28). Indeed, he notes that he selected the four authors in part because they were the "best at imagining a tragic sensibility from

which to understand the Civil War and its legacies” (22-23). Yet Blight only devotes limited space to such a unifying thread through his separate portraits. For example, his discussions of Warren’s “tragic vision” of history that paired good and evil as necessary partners (55-59), and of Catton’s conflicted understandings of “tragedy” as either the harbinger of redemption or as a meaningless sideshow to sentimentalism (126), deserve further attention as bridges between the two authors. A greater—and perhaps a predominant—focus on the concept of tragedy would thus bolster the cohesion of Blight’s already powerful arguments.

Nevertheless, Blight fulfills his two main purposes. Blight reveals in a convincing manner how central the Civil War and its memory were to the four writers, relating their discussions of the war and its legacies to the very foundations of their upbringings and creeds. At the same time, and equally originally, Blight uses the literary and historical narratives of the 1950s and 1960s to provide a compelling window onto the various currents of Civil War memory at the time of the Centennial—and, perhaps, previews the shapes of the memories that will emerge as the Sesquicentennial progresses. With his eminently readable prose, Blight has crafted a powerful work that will help define the field of Civil War memory regarding the twentieth century, as his *Race and Reunion* did with respect to the post-war nineteenth century. Thus, *American Oracle* comes highly recommended for scholars and general audiences alike.

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[1] David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[2] Jon Wiener, “Civil War, Cold War, Civil Rights: The Civil War Centennial in Context, 1960-1965,” in Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh, eds., *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 237-257; and Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).



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