

Memory Struggles in the Past and Present: A Review of Recent Contributions to the Study of Civil War Memory

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Reviewed Work(s)

Brown, Thomas J. *Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

Marshall, Anne E. *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

Rubin, Anne Sarah. *Through the Heart of Dixie: Sherman's March and American Memory*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

Hettle, Wallace. *Inventing Stonewall Jackson: A Civil War Hero in History and Memory*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011.

Harris, M. Keith. *Across the Bloody Chasm: The Culture of Commemoration among Civil War Veterans*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014.

The Civil War ended over one hundred and fifty years ago, but its memory is still hotly contested. Public debate has long raged over the war's causes, and in recent months, Confederate flags, relics, and monuments have also been points of contention. The most significant struggle concerned the removal of the Confederate battle flag from the grounds of the South Carolina State House in July of 2015, with other disputes occurring at various state capitals and universities across the South. Cultural memory is essential to this contemporary conflict, and we are reminded of sociologist Maurice Halbwach's notion that the past is a historical construct shaped and mobilized for presentist needs.¹ Groups on both sides of the issue invoke memory and history to support their position, and as a result, scholarship of Civil War memory has never been more relevant.

Historians have intervened in these debates by analyzing the messy relationship between the history of Civil War and how it has been remembered. David Blight's monumental *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* popularized the field of Civil War memory with

¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser ed. and tr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

his argument that race was systematically erased from white Americans' memory of the conflict.² In recent years, scholars have built off Blight's work and have grown increasingly creative in how they have uncovered, exposed, and analyzed the topic. Although none of the works examined here are as comprehensive as Blight's book, each historian makes a significant and unique contribution to the historiography of Civil War memory by uncovering the memory struggles associated with different sites, campaigns, states, monuments, commemoration events, and even individuals.³ Together they provide new frameworks and methodologies for further scholarship on an issue that remains relevant not only for scholars and students of history, but also for a divided American populace.

As the hotbed of secession and the only state where African Americans composed a majority of the state legislature during Reconstruction, South Carolina continues to serve as a battleground over the meaning, memory, and memorialization of the Civil War. In his monograph *Civil War Canon*, historian Thomas J. Brown wrestles with sites of local Confederate memory in the Palmetto State, focusing specifically on the major cities of Charleston and Columbia. The historiography abounds with narratives of commemoration as a reactionary force, but Brown takes this common theme a step further by tracing the interrelated nature of modernity and Confederate memory from 1865 to the present day. Building on historian Pierre Nora's notions of *lieux de mémoire*, Brown analyzes numerous memory sites as a way to prove how "white southerners negotiated disruptive modernity by revising presentations of the past" (1). For Brown, modernity is not a nebulous concept devoid of meaning. Instead, he defines it as the advancing social and technological changes that radically altered the postbellum United States.

Unlike most works of Civil War memory, which tend to focus on the period between the war's immediate aftermath and the Progressive Era, Brown expands his chronology backwards and forwards in time. He anchors the first four chapters in the late antebellum years because, as he argues, "collective memory does not originate directly in experience, even for an experience as profound as the Civil War" (2). He details how concepts related to Charleston's monument to John C. Calhoun, statues honoring dead Confederate soldiers and the women of the Confederacy on the grounds of the state capitol, and the postwar literary texts of Carolina authors originated in the years preceding the war. At the same time, he also traces Confederate memory up until the present day in the last four chapters of the book by analyzing the development of Charleston tourism associated with Fort Sumter, the removal of the Confederate battle flag from the top of the South Carolina State House in 2000, and the

² David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001). A number of scholars before Blight laid the foundation for the field of Civil War memory even if they did not identify their work as such. For examples, see Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980); Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, The Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

³ These themes are the perfect examples of what historian Pierre Nora identifies as *lieux de mémoire*, or realms of memory. See Pierre Nora, introduction to *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, vol. 1, *Conflicts and Divisions*, ed. and trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1.

excavation of the Confederate submarine the *H.S. Hunley* from the depths of Charleston Harbor in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

In each of these chapters, Brown demonstrates how white South Carolinians constructed and manipulated Confederate memory to confront modernity's threat to their contemporary southern culture. Brown's analysis of the relationship between the modernizing conceptions of gender and the war's memory is particularly successful. In the decades after the Civil War, for example, the Palmetto State experienced a "fluidity of gender norms" due to the uprooting of antebellum social structures and the proliferation of Darwin's theory of evolution (92). In this context, women sought to attain a more active public citizenship through their participation in the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), but influential male figures in Columbia disagreed over their interpretations of womanhood and masculinity.⁴ This tension erupted after the UDC inscribed their vision of a sentimental and sensitive masculinity on the monument honoring the Confederate dead, to the chagrin of prominent veterans who preferred remembering the "martial prowess" of Confederate soldiers (103). To combat this social modernity of gender, veterans erected their own monument to the women of the Confederacy that radiated the theme of motherhood, effectively countering women's citizenship claims by reminding them of their social sphere.

Civil War Canon succeeds in proving how South Carolinians have manipulated Confederate memory to confront the oncoming wave of modernity since the end of the Civil War. Some may view Brown's repeated inclusion of autobiographical details as distracting from his book's historical analysis, but such details serve as a creative way to connect the many different sites of Confederate memory and competing iterations of modernity to one another. Although *Civil War Canon* only explores Confederate memory through a limited number of sites in Columbia and Charleston, Brown is nevertheless able to craft a compelling, rich, and ambitious narrative and propose a possible framework for subsequent studies of Civil War memory.

But the Civil War did not only shape collective memory in the former Confederacy. In her book, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*, historian Anne E. Marshall explores the unique effect of Civil War memory on Kentucky, a Unionist southern state that has overemphasized its Confederate past. Marshall traces the development of the Bluegrass State's postwar Confederate identity through the seven decades from 1865 to 1935. Although twice as many Kentuckians donned northern blue as southern gray, the majority of the state's white residents remembered their Civil War experience through a Confederate lens. Marshall argues that Kentucky's unique position during the war, as the most prominent slave state to renounce secession, meant that "Union memory in Kentucky became too closely related with emancipation and African American progress for white Unionists to accept it as their own" (5). In contrast, Confederate memory was less problematic and blended with whites' postwar attempts to restore antebellum white supremacy.

⁴ Much of Brown's argument intersections with historian Karen Cox's work on the legacy and significance of the UDC. See Karen Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

Marshall paints a particularly nuanced picture of the competing Civil War memories embraced by and imposed on various Kentuckians. Given the overwhelming military opposition to the Confederacy, a significant strand of Civil War memory was that of former white Unionists. The majority of these men enlisted in order to protect the institution of slavery, but as the war progressed and emancipation competed with the preservation of the Union as the principle goal, Kentucky Unionists felt betrayed by the federal government. As a result, they struggled over how to remember their wartime victory since they shared the consequences of defeat with their Confederate adversaries. Most Unionists thus promoted sectional reconciliation as a postwar policy and united with former white Confederates through political alliances. In the eastern mountainous regions of the state, however, irreconcilable Unionism persisted, contributing to a postwar memory of a geographically divided Civil War Kentucky that pitted uncouth, nonslaveholding easterners against the genteel, civilized westerners of the Bluegrass region. According to Marshall, this “supposed blanket of Unionism of Appalachian Kentucky ultimately served only to reinforce the state’s general Confederate identity” (112). Although less prevalent than that of white Unionists, African American memory is not absent either, as Marshall demonstrates how people of color memorialized their own wartime experiences in various ways. Given the abundance of these competing memory claims, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky* successfully reveals that Kentuckians’ construction of a postwar Confederate identity was just as unique as their wartime experiences. In crafting such a narrative around an entire state, Marshall makes an important and lasting contribution to the historiography of Civil War memory.

Like Brown and Marshall, historian Anne Sarah Rubin focuses on Civil War memory within a southern state, but instead of analyzing specific sites of memory or the construction of a contested state memory, Rubin concentrates on what she believes to be “the most symbolically powerful aspect of the American Civil War”: Sherman’s March to the Sea (1). In the winter of 1864-1865, Union soldiers, under the command of General William Tecumseh Sherman, captured Atlanta and set off through the Georgia countryside to break the will of Confederate civilians. Many scholars have reconstructed the campaign, and Rubin crafts her narrative around these previous analyses. Yet it is the memory of the March that takes center stage in *Through the Heart of Dixie: Sherman’s March and American Memory*, allowing Rubin to both contribute to the burgeoning literature of the campaign itself and add another methodological framework to the study of Civil War memory.

In spite of her work’s title, Rubin insists that her “project is more about stories than memories” (4). The first three chapters trace various individuals’ stories of Sherman’s March. Here Rubin demonstrates how Confederate civilians, Union soldiers (or “bummers,” as Sherman’s marchers were known), and African Americans all crafted their own narratives of Sherman’s March in order to meet their postwar needs. For example, civilians tended to disparage the campaign as the epitome of northern devilry as a way to promote the Lost Cause myth of “moral superiority” and “cultural difference.” To this end, Georgians concentrated on the numerous ways they defied their conquerors through token military resistance or by hiding their belongings, a clear attempt at evoking southern pride (46-47). Although downplaying violence against civilians, Union soldiers’ descriptions of the March were surprisingly detailed and unapologetic since they believed their actions led to the defeat of the Confederacy, a stance which Rubin understands to be a clear attempt to defy Lost Cause rhetoric. African American

stories of Sherman's March were more ambivalent. Some understood it be essential to their freedom, while others criticized its destruction and the violence inflicted by bummers on people of color.

Such a momentous campaign was bound to have long-lasting cultural consequences, and the second half of *Through the Heart of Dixie* thus examines the March's portrayal in film, poetry, photography, popular music, travel narratives, and literature. Unlike the book's first chapters, Rubin presents almost a kaleidoscope of March stories. She does, however, contextualize each source, exploring why each individual chose to tell the story of the campaign through a particular medium. This approach fits with Rubin's goal of complicating the prevailing narrative of Sherman's March in American popular memory. Rubin certainly succeeds in doing so, although she could do more to identify overarching themes based on these isolated stories.

If Sherman was the Union's second-most recognizable general in postwar memory, it was Stonewall Jackson who enjoyed this status for the Confederacy. In *Inventing Stonewall Jackson*, historian Wallace Hettle analyzes biographies of Jackson as sites of memory. As Hettle contends, literature was the initial way Americans, from both the North and South, remembered Jackson but has been overlooked by scholars as a source of memory. Hettle argues that Jackson's "image [in the biographies] tells us as much about the people who have told the story as it does about Jackson himself" (6). It was their contrasting treatment of such an enigmatic figure that created the numerous historical controversies about his character that persist to the present day.

Hettle organizes his book as almost an extended historiographical essay, using each chapter to focus on a different way writers described the character of Stonewall Jackson to meet their own postwar needs.⁵ Jackson's earliest biographers presented contrasting accounts. One depicted him as a pious, Christian martyr with academic ambitions, a paradoxical perspective based, according to Hettle, on the idea that the postwar South should strive for progress while maintaining prewar social hierarchies (27-29). Another early biographer suggested that Jackson was an eccentric hero, a combination of the author's penchant for the romantic literature of Sir Walter Scott and his revulsion for southern aristocratic culture. Hettle also takes care to stress how women shaped Jackson's legacy, with his wife Mary Anna Jackson describing Jackson as a loving husband and the progressive suffragist Mary Johnston stressing Jackson's violence. As modernity transformed southern values in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, subsequent authors depicted Jackson as "a kindly slaveholder," or "the embodiment of agrarian values" (146).

Inventing Stonewall Jackson is a relatively concise monograph that makes a compelling argument. Yet, at times, Hettle may overestimate the biographies impact' on the popular imagination. By his own admission, two of the biographies he analyzes did not generate voluminous sales, weakening his argument about their impact on collective memory. Nevertheless, by constructing a narrative around the memory of a significant historical figure,

⁵ For more on the connection between historiography and memory, see Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, CT: University Press of New England, 1993).

Hettle makes a lasting methodological contribution to the historiography of memory studies and proves how the early biographers of Jackson profoundly shaped his enduring image in American public memory.

Dying during the conflict, Stonewall Jackson was not able to personally influence public Civil War memory. Surviving Union and Confederate veterans, however, contributed to the war's memory by crafting narratives that suited their sectional interests. In *Across the Bloody Chasm*, historian M. Keith Harris chronicles how veterans on both sides of the conflict chose to remember it. In spite of the enduring image of national reconciliation in the postwar decades, Harris contends, in agreement with other scholars of Civil War memory, that it was only northern and southern civilians, especially those coming of age after the war, who hoped to find common ground between the two sections. Veterans, in contrast, "worked tirelessly to preserve sectional memories that advanced one side over the other and conjured fear, anger, and resentment among formerly warring parties" (1-2). They did so through commemoration events, reunions, veterans' organizations, and their postwar written ruminations of the Civil War, including memoirs and regimental histories. In what Harris identifies as a paradox, veterans did strive for reconciliation, but they only wanted it on their own, sectional terms.

Harris crafts his narrative to show the contested nature of memory more than any other work analyzed here. *Across the Bloody Chasm* reads almost like a debate between Union and Confederate veterans over the memory of the war. In the first chapter, Harris lays the foundation for the reasons veterans refused to forget or reconcile with their adversaries by insisting that former Union and Confederate soldiers could not overcome the wartime atrocities committed against prisoners of war and civilians. Union soldiers' memories of their experiences in Confederate prisons and Confederate veterans' recollections of Sherman's campaign and the destruction of Fredericksburg were especially significant. In later chapters, Harris deals with northern and southern veterans separately by analyzing their contrasting arguments over two issues: treason and emancipation. Union veterans initially insisted that the southern cause was not honorable because Confederates had committed treason, and southerners countered by arguing that their cause was a fight against tyranny. In later decades, Union veterans also insisted that they fought for the cause of emancipation, a sentiment Harris identifies as misremembering on the part of some veterans. Confederates misremembered, as well, and attempted various ways to unburden themselves from the legacy of slavery or simply to divert attention from it.

There is no doubt that the majority of Confederate and Union veterans promoted their sectional memory of the war in direct, almost polar opposition to their former adversaries. Still, Harris would have done well to also consider the memories of southern Union veterans and African American veterans. He argues that Union veterans across the nation, "regardless of class makeup or geographic location," agreed that emancipation was their goal (91). As Marshall demonstrates in *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*, however, some white veterans, particularly in the Border States, shied away from the memory of emancipation. With Confederate and Union veterans living in such close proximity in states like Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, and Maryland, the contestation of memory would take on added, local significance that could contribute to Harris' analysis. Similarly, African American voices are absent from *Across the Bloody Chasm*. Harris does challenge the historiographical interpretation that veterans intentionally ignored African Americans in their commemoration events, but he makes no

distinction between African American veterans' memory of the war and that of their white counterparts. In spite of these omissions, Harris is very successful at what he sets out to do, and *Across the Bloody Chasm* is an important contribution to both the historiography of Civil War memory and the history of sectional reconciliation.

Whether through the erection of monuments, commemoration celebrations, creative writing, biographies of prominent figures, or veteran reunions, Americans, white and black, Union and Confederate, remembered the Civil War in various ways and with regard to their contemporary needs. Taken together, the books examined here present an overview of the conflicting, often contentious nature of Civil War memory and the creative methodologies that recent historians have used to analyze it. The Civil War has always been a controversial topic for the American public, and as long as it remains so, historical analysis of the war's memory will continue to be a welcome field of academic contribution.

The historiography of Civil War memory has undergone an evolution of complexity since David Blight popularized the field in the early 2000s. Historians, however, could do more to capture the untold and diverse Civil War memories of women and people of color. Marshall and Rubin both describe African American memory in portions of their books, but their treatment is somewhat monolithic. African Americans' experiences during the war varied just as much as the experiences of white Americans. Hence, the next wave of scholarship would do well to explore how freedom, social hierarchy, military service, oppression by Union troops, and geographical displacement contributed to different memories of the war and how these memories were variously mobilized for the postwar African American community. Even more than African Americans, Native Americans' Civil War memory remains understudied. Not only did Native American men fight for both the Union and the Confederacy, the war had a profound impact on Indian communities at large.⁶ Finally, new scholarship should also try to discover how women, both black and white, remembered the war—a methodology Brown briefly employs in his book. How did women's memories compare to men of the same race, social class, or section? These new directions aside, it is clear from the successful and diverse analyses included in this review that the field of Civil War memory is exceptionally healthy and that scholars are continually seeking to complicate the narrative of how historical actors remembered the war and mobilized it to fit their contemporary needs. Future historians need to continue this tradition of complexity as they search for new avenues of scholarly inquiry.

⁶ For a recent analysis of Native American memory, see Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).