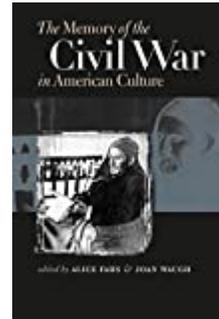




Alice Fahs, Joan Waugh, eds. *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. Illustrations + notes + index. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5572-0; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2907-3.



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Toward a Map of Civil War Memory

I once heard the distinguished historian Ira Berlin succinctly explain the difference between history and memory. History, he said, is open to discussion and disagreement. Memory isn't. Civil War buffs may endlessly debate, for example, the reasons for the Confederate army's defeat at Gettysburg. That's no problem. But it is out of bounds to suggest that this was an army of traitors who fought and bled and died trying to keep three and a half million Americans in bondage. That's sacrilege.

"History," said Napoleon in one of his ceaseless aphorisms, "is a fable agreed upon." If one substitutes for "history" the phrase "public memory," Napoleon got it exactly right. But a fable agreed upon *by whom?* And with what moral in mind? These are questions that in recent years have fascinated a growing number of historians, and perhaps none more raptly than those whose area of specialization is the Civil War, an episode called, with reason, the American Iliad.[1]

The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture is a valuable new contribution to this dialogue. It is the fruit of a conference held at the Huntington Library in

October 2003, which in turn grew out of a round table at the 1999 annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians entitled, "What Do Military and Cultural Historians of the Civil War Have to Say to Each Other?" (Not a lot, apparently, since only two of the essays in the volume were written by scholars with extensive publications dealing with the military dimension of the conflict.) According to the introduction, it "examines a variety of battles over the memory of the war during the last 135 years — recovers the racial and gender politics underlying numerous attempts to memorialize the war, provides new insights into how Lost Cause ideology achieved dominance in the late nineteenth century, and shows how contests over memories of the war were a vital part of politics during the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s" (p. 1). This covers quite a swath. It could have made for a scattered, uneven product, but the result holds together well.

The Memory of the Civil War can in many ways be seen as an extension of the thesis and argument in David Blight's *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. [2] In it, Blight deftly explored the construction

of the dominant public memory of the conflict in the first half-century after the conflict. He suggested that initially there were three broad strands of memory: a white Unionist interpretation that emphasized the war as the salvation of a republic that Lincoln called “the last best hope of earth”; a white Southern interpretation that swiftly rejected slavery as having anything to do with the conflict and emphasized instead the defense of state’s rights; and an African-American interpretation that stressed the conflict as the moment that not only destroyed slavery but also pointed America in the direction of human equality. The sympathies of *Race and Reunion* lay quite obviously with the third, “emancipationist vision.” It did the best job of any work thus far in uncovering and elucidating that vision. It then went on to do the best job of any work thus far to show how white Americans buried that vision in the interests of creating a public memory that asserted the moral equivalence of the Union and Confederate causes.

The rejection of the emancipationist vision is one that both Blight and the essayists in *The Memory of the Civil War* deplore, and for good reason. It not only marginalized the African-American experience, making them seem the passive recipients of freedom despite the fact that some 200,000 blacks served in the Union army and navy, it also helped to legitimate a white supremacist racial order that lasted until the 1960s. Yet the need for sectional reconciliation required *some* kind of synthesis of the public memories of the conflict, and since it would have been impossible to synthesize all three interpretations—the Unionist, states’ rights, and emancipationist visions—it seems predetermined that one of these would be cast aside. In retrospect, one might wish that that the synthesis would have been between the Unionist and emancipationist visions (with unreconstructed rebels perhaps forced to leave the country as happened to 125,000 pro-British Loyalists after the American Revolution). But given the common commitment to white supremacy in both the North and South, it is hard to imagine any such thing occurring, and the essayists in *The Memory of the Civil War* do not try. Instead they extend Blight’s argument in new directions and track it longitudinally into the 1960s, when, thanks to the civil rights movement, the “emancipationist vision” begins to reappear.

Some of the essays deepen our understanding of matters that are already reasonably well known (indeed, four of the pieces have been previously published). Joan Waugh, for example, underscores how, during the mid-1880s, Ulysses S. Grant composed his *Personal Memoirs*

in such a way as to reject the already growing consensus that the North and South fought for different but morally equivalent visions of America. Gary W. Gallagher explores the ways in which three men—Robert E. Lee, his wartime subordinate turned hagiographer Jubal A. Early, and Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Douglas Southall Freeman—worked successively, and successfully, to entrench precisely that vision. Working from another angle, James M. McPherson performs a similar service in his study of how the Daughters of the Confederacy, United Confederate Veterans, and other Southern organizations worked tirelessly to embed this vision into school textbooks. David W. Blight’s essay exploring the origins of Memorial Day in the North and South is one of the key chapters in *Race and Reunion*.

Others I found more fresh, particularly Alice Fahs’s exploration of the Civil War as portrayed in the children’s literature between the 1860s, when the Northern literature emphasized motherhood and gave at least some respect to the African-American experience; and the 1890s, when it had (in ways for which she does not really account) come to emphasize fatherhood and (in ways that are more fully explored) come to depict African Americans in the shuffling, yassuh, steppin-fetchit mode that would become the typical twentieth-century white stereotype. The authors of children’s books, she argues, picked up on and faithfully passed along the emerging white vision of sectional reconciliation, in part because it gave such books a wider geographical market than they would otherwise have commanded. And she points out that while children’s literature is often dismissed as a “step-child” of adult literature, it is also an important conduit by which values—in this case, racial value—are transmitted from one generation to the next.

The caliber of all the contributions is uniformly high, but perhaps the best among a very good collection is Stuart McConnell’s concluding essay on “The Geography of Memory.” It not only draws together the volume’s other essays but also moves us forward in the understanding of memory as a concept. “Having absorbed the postmodern lesson that we cannot surgically remove information from the story in which it becomes embedded without embedding it in some other story,” he writes, historians “are too often content to line the stories up next to each other, like pieces of a dream, without considering their interrelation.” Thus, where the Civil War is concerned there can be Northern and Southern memories, men’s and women’s memories, black and white memories, Republican and Democratic memories, all peacefully coexisting without much thought given to their connec-

tions” (pp. 258-259).

Better, McConnell suggests, to draw a cognitive map of the landscape of memory that “describes not just relations of cultural space but relations of cultural power” (p. 262), and to understand that each generation has its own distinctive map. “We may abhor the Victorians’ penchants for blind partisan politics, mawkish sentimentality, reactionary jurisprudence, or racist social thought,” McConnell writes. “Yet these were the landmarks around which all late-nineteenth-century Civil War memories arranged themselves” (p. 263). Over time, he continues, “the highly political Gilded Age gave way to a twentieth century that put ever more stress on commercial entertainment, consumption, and tourism.” [M]emory came to be seen as a kind of entertainment rather than, in the nineteenth century, a political weapon” (p.

264). Understanding this shifting geography of memory, he concludes, “is to reimpose narrative on a sprawling democracy of versions.” *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* is a significant step in this direction.

Notes

[1]. See, e.g., Otto Eisenschiml and Ralph Newman, eds., *The American Iliad: The Epic Story of the Civil War as Narrated by Eyewitnesses and Contemporaries* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947); and Charles P. Roland, *An American Iliad: The Story of the Civil War*, 2nd ed. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004).

[2]. David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

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