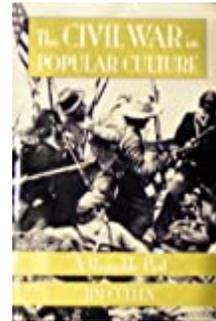


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jim Cullen. *The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past.* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995. x + 253 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56098-459-7.



Reviewed by Mark D. Van Ells (CUNY-Queensborough)

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Perhaps no event in American history has captured the popular imagination more than the Civil War. Depictions of the war in fiction, film, and other media reach tens of millions of people in the United States and abroad, far larger audiences than do professional historians. In *The Civil War in Popular Culture*, Jim Cullen explores popular interpretations of the war during the twentieth century, in the process revealing much about the cultural legacy of the war.

Cullen contends that popular portrayals of the Civil War reflect the contemporary concerns of the artists and their audiences, and uses five examples to illustrate this idea: In his poetry, Carl Sandburg intended his depiction of Abraham Lincoln to sooth concern over the expansion of federal power during the Great Depression; Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone With the Wind*, betrays its author's ambivalence about modern feminism; the imagery of the war in Southern Rock music exposes Southern white anxieties stemming from the Civil Rights movement; and the 1989 film *Glory* reflects a search for unifying principles among liberals in the wake of the Vietnam War. In the final chapter Cullen studies the world of Civil War reenactors, a largely white middle class group who pursue the activity to reaffirm their own sense of place in an increasingly pluralistic American society. In each case, the war provides a "reusable past," into which the artists

and their audiences project the hopes and fears of their own times. Though popular renderings of the war are often more sentimental than historically accurate, Cullen notes that professional historians also express contemporary concerns, and suggests that scholars might benefit from considering more carefully the personal meanings of history to individuals and groups.

This reviewer's only significant criticisms involve the author's management of information. First, the work seems laden with extraneous detail. While Cullen's knowledge is impressive, the mountain of background information he provides sometimes obscures rather than enhances his arguments. Second, the author says little about why he chose to study the popular culture outlets he did, writing only that he considers them to be "unusually apt and important embodiments of the questions, tensions, and ideological solutions of their time" (3). While the selections are appropriate, one wonders if they are the most effective. For example, the author bases his chapter on Southern Rock on fragmentary lyrics from a small sampling of songs. Might a discussion of Country music have enhanced the discussion of Southern white feelings, or been a more fruitful topic altogether?

By far the strongest aspect of the work is its originality. Cullen has identified and explored a clear but little understood trend in the cultural legacy of the Civil

War, and in doing so has found connections in a diverse range of topics. Some of Cullen's subjects warrant separate monographs. Reenacting, for example, is only one segment of a vast Civil War subculture which includes memorabilia collectors, round table discussion groups, genealogical researchers, and many others. Cullen chose to study the Civil War because of its central importance in American history, but the work also stimulates thinking about the relationship between public memory, popular culture, and other episodes in history. *The Civil*

War in Popular Culture is ambitious, pathbreaking, and thought provoking. Given that Americans will continue to debate the Civil War for some time to come, the work will remain interesting and relevant for the foreseeable future.

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