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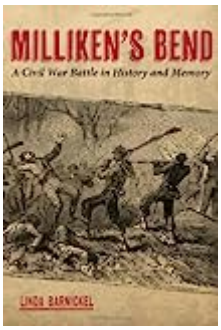

Linda Barnickel. *Milliken's Bend: A Civil War Battle in History and Memory.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013. 320 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-4992-8.

Kevin M. Levin. *Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012. 200 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3610-3.

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War or Murder?

In the last two decades, scholarship on African American Civil War soldiers has flourished. Important books by Joseph Glatthaar (*Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* [1990]), Keith P. Wilson (*Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers during the Civil War* [2002]), Barbara A. Gannon (*The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* [2011]), and others have ensured that the wartime toil and postwar dilemmas of black soldiers in blue now occupy a fitting place in the Civil War narrative. Not coincidentally, Civil War memory studies emerged at the same time as an august subfield. Such historians as David W. Blight (*Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* [2001]), John R. Neff (*Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* [2005]), and Caroline E. Janney (*Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* [2013]) have produced rich studies of the complex ways that Americans have remembered and forgotten their Civil War.

In their impressively researched and well-written books, independent scholars Linda Barnickel and Kevin M. Levin contribute meaningfully to both historiographies, examining the historical memory (or lack thereof) of two ferocious engagements involving black troops. Barnickelâs book explores the June 7, 1863, battle of Millikenâs Bend, Louisiana, a bloody fight during the Vicksburg campaign, while Levinâs treats the July 30, 1864, battle of the Crater, a most bizarre reprieve from the torpid siege operations around Petersburg, Virginia. For generations, Americans ignored the ugly massacre of black troops at the Crater, and–uniquely aided by the changing course of the Mississippi River, which gradually submerged the battlefield beneath its porridge-like mud–all but forgot Millikenâs Bend. In the end, both con-

tests were ugly demonstrations of the warâs escalating violence and poignant manifestations of the warâs deepest (racial) meaning.

Levin is most interested in how the story of the Crater became segregated, though he largely misses the opportunity to address how the story was sanitized. His subtitle posits that the Crater was âwar as murder.â A more fascinating question is how âmurderâ became remembered as âwar.â The dearth of monuments on the battlefields of 1864–from the Wilderness and Spotsylvania to the siege lines of Petersburg–suggests a popular distaste not merely for the mine explosion and its revolting racial aftermath, but also for the type of conflict the Civil War had become by its final year.

Dispatching the sordid details of the Crater fight in a succinct opening chapter, *Remembering the Battle of the Crater* principally focuses on the relationship between Virginiaâs social and political climate and the memory of the battle. The general theme here will be familiar to most scholars: memories are inherently political, and they are rooted in the social and cultural concerns of those who do the remembering. In his discussion of the decade immediately after the war, Levin is principally concerned with the memories of Confederate veterans, who, owing to the âmuted and paternalisticâ racial politics of Virginia in the 1870s, were eager to recall one of their last soldierly triumphs without making deliberately provocative references to the mutilated bodies of the United States Colored Troops (p. 42).

The reasonable politics of postwar Virginia owed much to Major General William Mahone, the Confederate commander at the Crater, who steered a biracial, bipartisan coalition known as the Readjuster movement. Reminding us that the âLost Causeâ was hardly a monolithic enterprise, Levin expertly recounts the poisoned arrows hurled at Mahone by Jubal Early and others chiefly concerned about âwho could claim legitimate ownership and control of Virginiaâs Confederate heritageâ (p. 68). Mahoneâs brand of politics was ultimately conquered. The South was âredeemed,â and by the turn of the century, segregation belted the South, including Virginia. Levin has curiously little to say about the all-important decade of the 1890s, but he does take us to the 1903 reenactment spectacle staged by Confederate veterans. âFor fear of reminding the local black population of their own steps toward freedom achieved during the Civil War,â Levin writes, the reenactment could not properly depict the role of African-Americansâ in the fight. Here, the author draws the distinction between the raw, âprivateâ memories held by individual veterans and the official, âpublicâ memory performed for the crowd and dominated by the Lost Cause. The story was much the same in 1937, when yet another reenactment offered a âwholly celebratory remembranceâ of rebel bravery–without âany serious attention to the presence of black soldiersâ (p. 105).

Throughout the book, Levin is attentive to a black âcounter-memory.â For years, black memories of the Crater were manifested on the margins–with articles in veteransâ newspapers, memoirs, and black militia companies. Only in the 1950s and 1960s did the African American narrative gain visibility. (Indeed, Levin speculates that racial strife in the Petersburg area was one important reason the centennial of the Crater went entirely unmarked.) The dominant public narrative changed, however, beginning in the late 1970s. Levin ends on a note of optimism, applauding the National Park Service and local Petersburg officials for working together to render a more nuanced interpretation of the Crater that squarely confronts race and slavery.

While Levin is interested in how subsequent generations remembered the Crater, Barnickel seeks to wrest the fight at Millikenâs Bend from historical obscurity. Although overshadowed in public memory by Port Hudson and Battery Wagner, the battle at Millikenâs Bend was significant–not least of all because it âhelped change attitudes and answered in the affirmative the question of whether black troops would fightâ (p. 139). Throughout the summer of 1863, abolitionists and army agents urging men of color to take up arms in defense of the Union buttressed their arguments by pointing to the heroism of black troops at Millikenâs Bend. Still, this extraordinary display of African American mettle (black soldiers accounted for more than 50 percent of the Union forces) did not leave an entirely sanguine legacy. The battleâs ugly aftermath–namely, the maltreatment by incensed Confederate troops of both white and black Union enlisted men–contributed, Barnickel argues, to the demise of the well-oiled prisoner exchange system that characterized the early years of the war.

Barnickel excels by situating the fight at Millikenâs Bend in the longer history of slavery, emancipation, and white racial anxieties in the hinterlands of Louisiana. Like Levin, she dispenses with the traditional battle narrative in a single but successful chapter, enhanced by several maps. Building on the solid foundation laid by previous scholars, she skillfully narrates the âperiodic outbreaks of insurrectionary panicâ in the antebellum pe-

riod and the arrival of emancipation in the Mississippi River Valley (p. 12). Her treatment of the battleâs aftermath takes a similar approach. An impressively even-handed chapter unpacks the âtangle of fact, fiction, and half-truthsâ surrounding the fortune of the white and black prisoners bagged by Confederates at Millikenâs Bend. âRumor sometimes gains its own force,â Barnickel writes, although she ultimately concludes that âstrong evidence persists that executions took placeâ after the battle (pp. 112-113).

The memory theme is less well developed in Barnickelâs study, if only because âMillikenâs Bend was never a prominent battle, not even during the warâ (p. 164). She briskly recounts the efforts of veterans–black and white–to safeguard the memory of black participation in the war in the late nineteenth century, but has precious little to say about the early twentieth century. Like Levin, however, she concludes by celebrating the recent efforts of the National Park Service to restore Millikenâs Bend to public view.

These are excellent books. But while Levinâs book offers a few complications, both his study and Barnickelâs ultimately do little to fundamentally challenge the thesis proposed by Blightâs *Race and Reunion.* In many ways, these are the predictable and predetermined tales of an emancipationist memory inevitably beleaguered by the Lost Cause and reconciliationists. While we should celebrate with these authors the return of slavery and race to the heart of the Civil War metanarrative, we might also pose some admittedly risky questions: to what degree has the celebration of emancipation continued to conceal the warâs ugly horrors? And why *do* we remember murder as war?

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