

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Anne E. Marshall. *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xiii + 233 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3436-7.

Reviewed by Chris T. O'Brien (Millersville University of Pennsylvania)

Published on H-CivWar (April, 2014)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle (Saint Anselm College)

E. Merton Coulter, founder of the Southern Historical Association, is often quoted for his remark that “Kentucky waited until after the war was over to secede from the Union.”[1] While Coulter most famously summarized popular sentiment in postwar Kentucky, Anne E. Marshall vividly details the revitalization of Confederate culture in the Bluegrass State. In *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*, Marshall shows how Kentucky’s secession was an ideological phenomenon that spanned from the Emancipation Proclamation to the Great Depression era. Marshall focuses on political trends, racial conflict, and popular culture—such as fiction and song—to interpret the predominantly Unionist state’s glorification of a bygone Confederate past. Although brief, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky* is a compelling monograph of how members of a society selectively interpret the past in order to create the greatest sense of control and understanding over the present. This is a phenomenon that historians can explore in any subject, and thus, Marshall has contributed not only to the historiography of Kentucky but also to the philosophy of historical research.

Periodicals provide the vast majority of the text’s primary source material, although Marshall excels in incorporating popular fiction and even folk songs into her research. Diaries, correspondence, and election statistics feed Marshall’s examination of how postwar politics and memorialization in Kentucky skewed the historical truth of the state’s antebellum and Civil War experiences. Just as important, Marshall keeps the historiography of Civil War memory in sight throughout each chapter, clarifying when she is supporting or debunking widely accepted theses.

Marshall organizes her work thematically, rather than chronologically, which at times may disorient the reader. As we shall see, this approach is most problematic in her chapter on violence. Nevertheless, the thematic organization highlights her flowing prose and increases the text’s persuasiveness.

Marshall’s first chapter establishes the popular Unionist sentiment in antebellum Kentucky. However, social order in the Bluegrass State revolved around racial hierarchy, and the majority of white Kentuckians abhorred the radical abolitionists of the North. Politician and periodical editor Robert J. Breckinridge represented many Kentuckians in his belief that the federal government was the optimal system for preserving slavery. Thus, the majority of Kentuckians supported the Union, regardless of their position on slavery. Throughout the course of the war, approximately twice as many men volunteered for Federal service than those who joined the Confederate cause. However, Marshall’s first chapter shows that federal policies during the war, such as the violent treatment of guerrillas and prisoners, “often had the unintended consequence of inspiring anger among once-loyal citizens” (p. 22). Other policies, such as the suspension of the freedom of the press, served to disenchant Kentuckians with the federal war effort. However, Marshall’s point here is somewhat diminished by the sheer number of in-text newspaper quotations, which give the reader the impression of a robust and widely read media industry. But most important, federal goals of emancipation squandered Kentucky’s support for the Union. The destruction of institutionalized slavery uprooted the foundations of racial hierarchy and shattered antebellum

social structures. Expressing their disappointment with the consequences of the war, the majority of white Kentuckians chose to overlook the history of federal support in the state, and rather celebrated the memory of an idealized Confederate past.

Marshall examines civilian violence and war memorialization to prove this point. As the Bluegrass State was nominally a part of the Union, it did not undergo federal reconstruction. Politics in Kentucky became more polemical than ever, as demonstrated by the sudden domination of ex-Confederates in elected offices. With a barrage of primary quotations, Marshall reveals that a candidate's chances of winning an election depended heavily on his history with the Confederate armies—having been wounded while in the service was a bonus. Likewise, Kentuckians who could not accept the terms of emancipation felt a sense of shame regarding their service in the federal armies. Marshall balances these election statistics and newspaper publications with contemporary political cartoons that criticized Kentucky's newfound Confederate spirit. In this way, Marshall uses a variety of sources, despite the contradictions between them, to most faithfully unravel the past.

The "politics of readjustment," as Marshall names them, established an era of violence targeting African Americans and supporters of the Republican Party. Vigilantes, the Ku Klux Klan, and other bands of civilian enforcers echoed the brutal guerrilla tactics of the war years. Marshall's extensive reliance on periodicals in this section illuminates the varying perceptions of this violence. She does not shy away from reporting conflicting viewpoints on the matter, but rather lets her subjects speak for themselves. Many Kentuckian publications alluded to the concept of dignified violence, conjuring up the ideals of martial gentility in the antebellum South. Conversely, periodicals from outside the state, such as the *New York Times*, decried the violence as the result of New South Democrats carelessly ruling the state. Including both perspectives, Marshall persists in her theme that events will be remembered by the manner in which they serve present needs. She concludes this chapter with the assertion that postwar violence ruined the antebellum concept of honor and gentility in martial prowess. The argument is persuasive, but Marshall continues to

expand on the history of these concepts for several pages before closing the chapter. These discussions would have been more judiciously placed at the beginning of the chapter in order to allow the reader to trace the extinction of honor in violence as the chapter progresses.

Marshall's finest work is apparent in her discussion of war memorials. Through an examination of celebrations, conferences, and monuments, she finds that the proliferation of Confederate memorabilia and the lack of federal memorials was not a rejection of the Union. Rather, the creation of a Confederate Kentucky was a salute to the glorified Lost Cause and a rejection of emancipation. Marshall ably supports her argument with data as simple as demographics. She reports that celebrations of traditional holidays, such as the Fourth of July, involved an increasing number of African American participants and a decreasing number of white participants. This trend was not unique to Kentucky, however, as one may think of Vicksburg, where the events associated with the Fourth of July in 1863 resulted in a nearly century-long dismissal of Independence Day celebrations. But if there was such a notion of Kentuckian exceptionalism, it was in Kentuckians' choice to so selectively commemorate their past, even to the point of obscuring the broader picture.

Creating a Confederate Kentucky is rich with in-text primary quotations; there are few pages that are not colored with newspaper excerpts, diary entries, or the candid comments of politicians. Marshall permits her subjects to speak for themselves in this way, but her method is not without drawbacks. Whereas Marshall's prose is stimulating, her endnotes are stark and often lack any elaboration or advice for additional research. Thus, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky* may not be useful to students as an exercise in following the endnotes, but it is a persuasive and concise text. With this publication, Marshall has opened many outlets for fresh dialogue between scholars of Kentucky and scholars of Civil War memory.

Note

[1]. E. Merton Coulter, *The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 439.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Chris T. O'Brien. Review of Marshall, Anne E., *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil*

War Memory in a Border State. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. April, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39866>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.