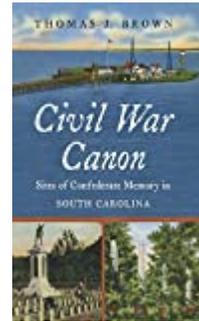


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas J. Brown. *Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina.* Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 376 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-2095-4.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

The American Civil War is arguably the most divisive event in the history of the United States. Perhaps more than any other period, the Civil War era captures the public's attention, regardless of whether observers are historical enthusiasts or otherwise. The construction of monuments, staging of reenactments, and display of flags—just to name a few examples—readily inspire passionate speeches in defense of heritage and the meaning of the country's bloodiest war. Author Thomas J. Brown delves into this topic with a multifaceted approach, using South Carolina as the geographic focus. *Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina* is opportune given the recent, intense debates over the remembrance of the conflict.

The discussion of memory must be articulated through the selection of a theme: political movements, artistic tributes, scholarship, shifting gender roles in response to commemorative efforts, or even commercialization. Brown's methodology integrates all of these disparate elements, providing the reader with a wide-ranging survey of South Carolina's struggle to address its intricate and controversial past. The author's own proximity to the subject at hand (he lives in Columbia) allows him to evaluate the issue from both professional and personal perspectives. Brown's decision to use a broad lens

is one of the book's strengths.

It covers an impressive chronological span, from the mid-nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. This allows the reader to appreciate the evolution of memorialization, and to understand how the debate is closely linked to the political atmosphere of the period. The topics are varied, ranging from poetry and graves to sculptures and the preservation efforts surrounding the *H.L. Hunley*, a Confederate submarine. To address this range of content, Brown displays a great facility in offering literary analysis, discussing the symbolism of public artwork, and determining the agendas that can underlie historical interpretation.

Perhaps more noteworthy than any other aspect of the book is Brown's effort to tell highly localized stories of national importance (p. 3). Rather than attempting to offer a national history, the author centers his efforts on regional stories that have much broader implications for Civil War commemoration. He explains that the chronologically overlapping segments of the book tell a unified story even though the particular terms of commemorative contestation shifted as successive generations of South Carolinians negotiated different forms of modernity (p. 5). The concept of tracking change

through time is central to Brown's work. Instead of recounting isolated occurrences, his goal is to delineate the evolution of thought and its physical manifestations in specific places.

It should be noted that Brown wrote this book with an academic audience in mind. Granted, the dialogue concerning memory has the potential for broad relevance in the public sphere. The essence of remembrance is its centrality to popular views on history. However, while this volume has ample material of interest to readers from diverse backgrounds, its style is indicative of certain expectations. Brown maintains a level of analysis that may prove unfamiliar and difficult for those readers unaccustomed to literary critique, discussions of modernity and the evolution of place, or the connections between memorialization and changing gender roles. These are all thought-provoking areas of inquiry, yet by necessity, Brown's tome involves concessions. In this case, the text is rendered less approachable for the sake of analytical depth.

The author's commitment to academic rigor is evident, from the twenty-two-page bibliography to the thirty-seven pages of endnotes. Brown places his work in

historiographical context, reminding the reader that this tome is far from a stand-alone piece without connection to other contributions. The parity of primary and secondary source material is a clear indication that Brown not only is intimately familiar with the scholarship surrounding his subject but has also carried out extensive research of his own.

Studying the American Civil War is an exercise in exchange. Scholars routinely trade ideas in their eternal quest for truth, but it is the public's interface with the past that forms the foundation of this book. The study of war and society encompasses more than the battlefield itself, something evinced by the duality of its name. Brown's decision to take a transformative military phenomenon and explore its resounding impact across the decades reflects this mission. As a contribution to the scholarship, *Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina* distinguishes itself by its ambitious scope and effective balancing of multiple themes. Hopefully, volumes such as this will generate further discussion and inspire the industry of other historians. It is in this way that the legacy of the Civil War, and all of the rich cultural allusions incumbent upon it, will remain in the popular lexicon.

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