Civil War Memories: Contesting the Past in the United States Since 1865

Review Number: 2238

Publish date: Thursday, 3 May, 2018

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ISBN: 9781421423494

Date of Publication: 2017

Price: £18.50

Pages: 288pp.

Publisher: John Hopkins University Press

Publisher url: <https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/content/civil-war-memories>

Place of Publication: Baltimore, MD

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When I was a fourth grade student in suburban Birmingham, Alabama in the 1970s, the history curriculum was devoted to a study of our state. Our teacher, Mrs. Lawson, supplemented our textbook with personal recollections of the Civil War gleaned from her own grandmother, who had been a girl in the 1860s. Mrs. Lawson's tales of the terror inspired by Wilson's raiders, a Union cavalry contingent that swept through Alabama in the closing days of the war, made very clear to her impressionable charges just who the bad guys in this story were.

The War Between the States, as she called it, was a formative part of Mrs. Lawson's heritage and the society she was a part of. In his new monograph *Civil War Memories: Contesting the Past in the United States since 1865*, Robert J. Cook supplies a thoughtful and eminently readable explanation for why Mrs. Lawson's early 20th-century Alabama girlhood would have been replete with tales of Confederate heroism and honour and Yankee villainy. More than that though, *Civil War Memories* is a convincing discussion of how Americans North and South have remembered and/or forgotten that defining conflict and the ways in which those memories have intersected with contemporary concerns in the century and a half since Appomattox.

After an introduction that effectively sets memory of the 1861-5 conflict within a context of contemporary issues like the 2015 Charleston, SC church shooting and debates around the removal or retention of Confederate memorials and statuary, Cook starts back at the beginning. Following a brief overview of the secession crisis and war Cook guides the reader through the immediate post-war years when the 'Lost Cause' mythology that would remain so potent throughout much of the 20th century had its origins in what Cook terms 'a coherent discourse by unrepentant former Confederates writing in a highly charged political climate' (p. 42). Alongside an account of the concerted efforts of white Southerners to shape the way the war was remembered, the monograph nicely covers the virtual canonisation of Robert E. Lee. Demonstrating the centrality of race to the war and war memory, Cook highlights Lee's 'profound hostility toward Republican efforts to make the freed people equal under the law' (p. 45).

There are also useful overviews of the genesis and growth of groups such as the United Confederate Veterans, United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Grand Army of the Republic that would prove so

instrumental in perpetuating particular versions of war memory into the 20th century. There is an able analysis of a transition in Southern war memory with Cook describing the Lost Cause ‘shedding its mourning clothes in favor of triumphal garb’ (p. 61). Cook provides a succinct and convincing explanation of this manifestation of Southern war memory that coalesced simultaneously with a rigid Jim Crow social order and offered whites of all classes both a shared identity and vindication of the Lost Cause. This strain of memory, glorifying the Old South, vilifying Yankees and Reconstruction, and obscuring slavery’s formative role in the war, is the one that so influenced the thinking of Southerners like Mrs. Lawson, Margaret Mitchell, and countless others.

As useful as Cook’s contribution to the well-worn topic of Lost Cause and Southern war memory is, it is his treatment of Union war memory that is most particularly welcome. He ably reinforces David Blight’s accounts of black efforts, particularly by Frederick Douglass, to preserve and disseminate an emancipatory memory of the struggle, commenting that ‘by committing himself and his race to an anti-slavery interpretation [of the Union cause] Douglass hoped to prevent northern whites from backsliding on equal rights’ (p. 79). Cook adds welcome nuance to recent historiographical consensus around Northern abandonment of the emancipationist memory of the war for the sake of sectional reconciliation with his emphasis on the continuing importance of emancipation in Union war memory in the late 19th century. He buttresses his argument for close connection between Civil War memory and contemporary politics in the latter decades of the 19th century with the convincing caveat that ‘Republican leaders wanted to sustain emancipationist memories of the Union cause not so much because they cared about blacks per se, but because they feared the corrosive impact that southern whites’ increasing control over the freedpeople would have on their own political power’ (p. 88). But still, the emancipationist strain persisted among Union veterans; Cook cites one aging Union veteran as explaining his support for a civil rights organization: ‘when a soldier was in need he alys found a frand in the collared man’ (p. 93). And another: ‘To pass my discharge down to my grand children to show them that, in the conflict for Nationality and freedom, I stood on the right side and to show them that my gratitude or manhood was not so shrivelled up and small as to oppose extending equal rights to my colored comrades in arms’ (p. 93).

Cook also effectively conveys the extent to which wartime animus persisted at the turn of the century by recounting events at the dedication of a battlefield park on the site of the Battle of Chickamauga. At the ceremonies in September 1895, the governor of Alabama blamed the Civil War on Puritan fanaticism and ‘derided the idea that Union troops had fought to free the slaves’ (p. 106). Cook goes on to quote Vermont governor and Union veteran Urban A. Woodbury’s response to this, in which he insisted that ‘we cannot teach our children but that they [the Rebels] were wrong’ (p. 106). Despite this, however, Cook points out that ‘the shoots of reconciliation were bursting out everywhere’, pointing to a generational change through, in what he calls a ‘tectonic shift’ in Civil War memory, the sons and daughters of veterans began to prioritize a national future ‘largely untainted by the damaging fissures’ of civil war (pp. 107, 97).

Cook skilfully illuminates the importance of literature and popular culture in bringing white Americans together at the turn of the century. He covers familiar works such as *The Red Badge of Courage*, spotlighting Stephen Crane’s novel as having ‘denuded the conflict of its politics’ in other words, slavery, and framing the war as a shared national event (p. 103). He adds to this with a discussion of the part films like *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* played in what he calls ‘interconnected reconciliatory and Lost cause narratives’ (p. 126).

Cook tracks the evolution of Americans’ Civil War memory throughout the 20th century, consistently and effectively linking this with the concerns of the day. In discussing Civil War historiography of the 1920s and 1930s, the author’s summation of academia’s failure to counter racist interpretations of Reconstruction is pithy and to the point: historians failed to critique such works because they by and large agreed with them. Also outlined is the challenge to these views by black historians such as Carter Woodson and W. E. B. DuBois and their efforts to further Frederick Douglass’ struggle to maintain the memory of the war as an emancipatory struggle.

The work utilises some excellent and (to me) unexpected sources. For example he cites fan letters to author Mackinley Kantor, whose 1955 novel *Andersonville* detailed the deplorable conditions at the eponymous Georgia prisoner of war camp. Kantor's work elicited reader response that underlined the continuing power of the conflict rouse emotion in Americans north and south. Cook quotes Northerners for whom Kantor's work summoned fond memories of fathers who had been incarcerated at Andersonville, one of whom wrote the author that his father: 'was never called into high councils and his opinion was never sought. His contribution to the cause of Lincoln and of the Union was humble but he gave it willingly. I never heard him complain' (p. 160). One Southern reader, however took issue with Kantor, charging that 'for anyone to write a book so full of venom, vitriol and bitterness against our People- to reopen the wounds of the War Between the States, it takes a mighty unusual person' (p. 161). Again, Cook here makes good use of popular culture to illuminate lingering and conflicting memories of the internecine struggle.

Bringing the narrative up to the time of the Civil Rights Movement, Cook highlights the enduring power of reconciliatory memories of the war by remarking that 'even members of the UDC and the SCV, devoted to honouring the Confederacy, regarded themselves as patriotic Americans, sure in the knowledge that most northern whites acquiesced to segregation and acknowledged great southern commanders like Lee and Jackson as authentic national heroes' (p. 210). The 100th anniversary of the war coincided with the apogee of the Civil Rights Movement and Cook draws on his previous study *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial* to put into context the importance of war memory to those involved in that struggle. The Centennial itself did not live up to the hype but Cook very effectively evokes the persistence of war memory during this period. Citing C. Vann Woodward's claim that the Civil Rights Movement could be thought of as a second Reconstruction, he quotes a white Mississippian who claimed that during the first Reconstruction: 'our grandfathers were in a far worse position than we are today. They banded together, ran the carpetbaggers and other damn yankees out of office and Mississippi and demanded that Federal troops be removed. Are we going to let them down?' (p. 169).

The monograph closes with a chapter entitled 'Afterlife' which traces recent developments in Americans' relationship with the legacy of the war. Remarking on sagging interest in the Civil War in an era of civil unrest, racial strife, Vietnam and Watergate, Cook cites declining attendance at sites such as Gettysburg ('the urge to make patriotic pilgrimages had abated') as well as a historiographical shift away from the war itself and towards topics like slavery and Reconstruction (p. 183). These fresh interpretations, which stressed African-American agency and debunked the widely accepted negative view of Reconstruction as a tragic mistake or vindictive Yankee vendetta 'kicked away the intellectual props of the reconciliatory and Lost Cause narratives of the Civil War era' (p. 183). But what goes around comes around and near century's end Civil War memory was making a comeback, this time filtered, to an extent, through these historiographical shifts. Popular culture is again a useful lens for Cook as he examines the impact in the 1990s of films such as *Glory*, *Gettysburg* and Ken Burns' landmark television series. Insightfully layering past and present, Cook concludes that

'it seems probable that the patriotic renewal of the Reagan years combined with the delayed cultural impact of the civil rights movement and the durability of the Civil War subculture to make the conflict a more attractive topic for filmmakers than it had been during the national malaise of the 1970s. Each of these productions left audiences with a patriotic afterglow and revealed the extent to which the stories that Americans told themselves about the 1860s had altered since the [1961-5] centennial commemorations (p. 187).

Cook observes the rise of Barack Obama , noting that the 44th president ‘fused the achievements of Lincoln, nineteenth-century Unionists and modern civil rights activists’, again bringing into focus the long reach of War memory. (p. 198.) Finally, bringing the monograph more fully up to date, Cook closes by reasserting the conflict’s continuing relevance, despite temporal distance, for a society that is ‘still burdened with persistent racial injustice’ (p. 212).

One might argue that Cook’s depiction of a ‘rapid decline’ in Abraham Lincoln’s popularity in the late 20th century is overstated, but that is a minor quibble with a monograph that deals so compellingly with complex questions. The real achievement of this book is to synthesize and create a clear narrative out of the rather messy and un-straightforward trajectory of Civil War memory in the United States. Throughout the study, Cook demonstrates the shifting yet persistent current of war memory, skilfully pointing out how it has intersected with concerns of the day and how it remains, despite being long since absent from living memory, the central, formative experience of the American people.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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