Recovered Memory of the Civil War

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RECOVERED MEMORY OF THE CIVIL WAR

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In his stirring, sorrowful conclusion to Black Reconstruction in America of 1935, W.E.B. Du Bois denounced the “propaganda of history” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that dehumanized black Americans in an effort to reunite a country divided by the Civil War. “In propaganda against the Negro since emancipation in this land,” Du Bois lamented, “we face one of the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings, an effort involving universities, history, science, social life and religion.” What must Du Bois have felt only two years after the publication of his book when Paul H. Buck, a historian at Du Bois’s alma mater of Harvard, published The Road to Reunion? That volume praised the “speedy reconciliation” between North and South; declared that “a union of sentiment based upon integrated interests had become a fact”; accepted the supposed inferiority of black Americans as a source of an insoluble “race problem”; and commended Americans, North and South, for putting the race issue aside in their admirable quest for national reconciliation. What must Du Bois have felt only two years after the publication of his book when Paul H. Buck, a historian at Du Bois’s alma mater of Harvard, published The Road to Reunion? That volume praised the “speedy reconciliation” between North and South; declared that “a union of sentiment based upon integrated interests had become a fact”; accepted the supposed inferiority of black Americans as a source of an insoluble “race problem”; and commended Americans, North and South, for putting the race issue aside in their admirable quest for national reconciliation.2 Buck’s book won the Pulitzer Prize. Du Bois’s book, though well received, would not get its rightful due from historians for another generation. For the past thirty years or so, toilers in the field of Reconstruction, most notable among them Eric Foner, have helped raise Du Bois to the historians’ pantheon while laying Buck and his kind to ground. Now, with the publication of David W. Blight’s Race and Reunion, which makes contest rather than consensus the theme of Civil War memory, and puts race back at the center of the story of reunion, we can close the grave for good on Buck.

More than a mere rebuttal to Road to Reunion, Race and Reunion is the most moving meditation on Civil War memory since Robert Penn Warren’s The Legacy of the Civil War (1961). It is also a gripping read. Wartime memories do not drift softly past one another in this book; they clash and grapple like wartime combatants, leaving a permanent mark on culture and society. Blight exposes memory for what it was and what it can be: an instrument of power.
The study of memory, once the province of literary scholars such as Edmund Wilson, Daniel Aaron, and Paul Fussell, as well as European social scientists such as Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, has been invaded in the last decade or so by American historians. Blight helped lead the charge in 1989 with his first book, *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War* (1989), a study of the abolitionist’s Civil War experience and his unflagging effort to keep the memory of slavery, emancipation, and African American heroism alive during Reconstruction and beyond. In the year of that book’s publication, the *Journal of American History* devoted a whole issue to memory, which included an essay by Blight. Then, two years later, Michael Kammen published his powerful, sprawling *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (1991). Today, the history of memory has become not merely a cottage industry but a boom trade, and the history of Civil War memory is the cash cow of the business. We have five books on southern memory and the war, one on the northern culture of conciliation, one on the Grand Army of the Republic and its work in shaping Civil War memory, three in just the past two years dealing with the memory of the war in popular literature, and one so far on Civil War monuments. Leaders have been taken up by the historians of memory: we have one book on Abraham Lincoln in memory, three on the memory of Robert E. Lee, a work in progress on the memory of Ulysses S. Grant, and even a study of George E. Pickett’s place in memory. Regimental memory also seems a genre—witness the recent essay collection on the legacy of the Massachusetts 54th. Battles have become fair game. Important books already have been published on the memory of Pickett’s Charge and The Wilderness, and another is in progress on the memory of Gettysburg. (Note to graduate students contemplating a dissertation on Civil War memory: choose your leader, regiment, or battle quickly—the pickings are still good but might soon be slim.)

All future studies of Civil War memory must reckon with *Race and Reunion*. Aside from plowing through the existing literature on the subject, Blight has unearthed incredible riches from a dizzying heap of sources: soldiers’ reminiscences, postwar fiction, congressional speeches and hearings, oral histories, private correspondence, and proceedings of public commemorations. To navigate this mass he was forced to make difficult choices. First, he limited the scope of his study to the first fifty years after the Civil War (the screening of D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* on the fiftieth anniversary of Appomattox makes for a powerful, unsettling epilogue). It was during this period that the enduring versions of Civil War memory were formed and the battles among these versions were most fierce, even fatal. Second, because Blight believes that “public memory”—his major interest—is to be found less in history books than in newspapers, private writings, and public meetings, he excludes...
most professional historians except those such as Douglass Southall Freeman and James Ford Rhodes whose impact on popular culture was undeniable. Third, while Blight tries not to slight anything relevant to Civil War memory, he keeps his focus on those phenomena that reveal "race as the central problem in how Americans made choices to remember and forget their Civil War" (p. 2). The result of Blight's wise research strategies, and of his powerful prose and piercing analysis, is an extraordinary tale of how an improvised script of sectional reconciliation came to write African Americans out of public memory—and out of national justice.

The metaphor of an improvised script runs through the book, always in a light-handed yet effective way. The improvised quality of reconciliation after the Civil War was almost a necessity. When the last Confederate army surrendered in May 1865, Congress had yet to pass a comprehensive plan of reconstruction, and Abraham Lincoln, who had recommended a plan back in late 1863, had been assassinated. With the future of reconciliation so uncertain, the nation might have done well to create something like South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A systematic airing of grievance and arranging of restitution might have allowed for both healing and justice. What the nation got instead was a contest between healing or justice, an unpredictable, ever-changing battle among the scripts of memory.

Three scripts in particular competed to write the memory of the Civil War. One, which Blight terms "emancipationist," told a story of sin and regeneration. Already in late 1863, Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass were inscribing emancipationist memory into national identity. Lincoln did so most famously in his call at Gettysburg for "a new birth of freedom." Douglass did so more forcefully in his speech at Philadelphia two weeks later, proclaiming that the war could not end "until the black men of the South, and the black men of the North, shall have been admitted, fully and completely, into the body politic of America" (p. 16). Lincoln and Douglass had "practiced from the same script," writes Blight, one with a "marvelous, but always endangered, career in American history and memory" (p. 18).

That script was destined to compete with a second, "reconciliationist" script, which kept racism and slavery out of the drama and reached for a sentimental climax of sectional embrace and national prosperity. Grant and Lee wrote the preface at their much-mythologized meeting at Appomattox in 1865—the southerner calm and dignified, the northerner respectful and generous, and neither venturing a word on slavery or emancipation. Three years later, in a remarkable meeting in West Virginia between Lee and the Union general William S. Rosecrans, condescending language regarding African Americans was added to the reconciliationist script. Both men were mocked for this gesture of reconciliation, for, as Blight tells us, the North and
South were not ready to reconcile. Yet, within only a decade of the West Virginia meeting, there would be “a level of popular forgetting that enabled the Rosecrans-Lee script for reconciliation to reach a new consensus” (p. 105).

A third, “white supremacist” script had been written before the war but was now re-crafted to accommodate the facts of emancipation and Confederate defeat. This script would take longer than the others to gain a sympathetic, popular audience in both the North and the South, but once in circulation, its grip on American culture would remain tenacious. Upheld mainly by southerners, but attracting a growing number of northerners, the white supremacist version of Civil War memory, like the emancipationist version, took a form of sin and regeneration. In this case, the sin was not slavery but Republican radicalism, and regeneration came not from racial equality but from a resurgence of elite white power throughout the South. White supremacists were well aware that their memory of the war inverted emancipationist memory. On the fortieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, a leader of the United Confederate Veterans, one of the more visible of the Lost Cause organizations, exhorted his comrades to commemorate the “Anglo-Saxon emancipation” delivered by southern redemption (p. 291).

Ultimately, and tragically, the voices of white supremacy and those of reconciliation joined together by the early 1900s, muffling much of the emancipationist strain. Blight quotes William Dean Howells: “What the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending” (p. 1). The public got what it wanted. By 1915, the emancipationist memory of the war seemed but a grace note in a sentimental symphony of white reunion.

Seeing the late nineteenth century as a time of divergence and convergence of three types of memory allows Blight to discern order in chaos. The complex process of Reconstruction becomes “one long referendum on the meaning and memory of the verdict at Appomattox” (p. 31). The chapters on Reconstruction are the most dramatic in the book, for it was in this era that the battles among memories were so fierce and the outcomes so unpredictable. Emancipationist memory reigned at Fort Sumter on April 14, 1865. While Denmark Vesey’s son, William Lloyd Garrison, and three thousand African Americans watched Robert Anderson raise the United States flag, which he had been forced to lower four years before, a regimental band played “John Brown’s Body.” But a reconciliationist counter-memory found voice even at this event, in the sermon of Henry Ward Beecher, who called for forgiveness of the South though promised “endless retribution” for former secessionists (p. 67). Reconciliationists then scored a clear victory with Decoration Day. The ritual began as an emancipationist moment in 1865, when African Americans buried Union dead at a Confederate race course, then was recast in the North as the female-led mourning ritual of Memorial Day, and finally evolved into
a national Memorial Day, in which sentimentalism spilled over northern and southern graves in a common stream, eroding the memory of black slavery and freedom. As Frederick Douglass well understood, white reconciliationists posed the greatest threat to emancipationist memory. “If war among the whites brought peace and liberty to the blacks, what will peace among the whites bring?” he asked (p. 132).

Veterans did the most to shape the landscape of Civil War memory, so it is appropriate that Blight devotes two meaty chapters to the topic of soldiers’ memory. Like all Americans, soldiers were determined to fashion a meaning of the war, but their challenge was the greatest. Recalling the gory details of the fight inflamed emotions and strained the bonds of reunion. According to Gerald F. Linderman, the risks involved in remembering led most soldiers to keep their more painful memories under wraps until the late nineteenth century, when an increased stability of psyche and society made it safe to talk about a horrible past. Blight argues differently. Again showing skepticism of tidy schematics, he contends that soldiers’ memories were always “more festering than sleeping” (p. 150). In the same way that he depicts emancipationist and reconciliationist memories of the war as always locked in battle with no victor assured, he reveals soldiers’ realistic and romantic versions of the war wrestling for supremacy from the first shot onward. Sometimes the struggle occurred within one man, as seems to have been the case with William Tecumseh Sherman, whose Memoirs (1875) contained both vivid gore and wistful tributes. Sometimes the struggle occurred between soldiers’ publishers. Alexander K. McClure began his Annals of the War in 1879 with faith in the healing power of reminiscence, but his series instead became a forum for embittered, partisan veterans to present the realities of a gruesome war. Romantic visions of war were more likely to be found in the reminiscences published in the Century, which ultimately issued the best-known set of soldiers’ recollections, Battles and Leaders of the Civil War (1888). By mining the archives of the Century, Blight uncovers a process by which Civil War memory was commodified (contributors were paid handsomely), sanitized (grisly details and vindictive tones were softened), and whitened (the 200,000 African Americans who served in uniform were rarely seen and never heard from). Editors bent on romantic reconciliation worked in tandem with the promoters of battle reenactments and other “spectacles of reunion” (Blight’s term) to produce an easily digestible and highly marketable version of a most civil, Civil War.

A division between romantics and realists marked not only the amateur writings of soldiers but also the fiction of seasoned authors like Thomas Nelson Page and Ambrose Bierce. Page is the villainous but victorious myth-maker and Bierce the heroic but defeated truth-teller in Blight’s drama of
sentiment trumping authenticity in the arena of postwar literature. Standing above the fray is Albion W. Tourgée, who saw from the start that realist style and emancipationist themes would fight an uphill battle against a sentimental literature of Confederate nostalgia. More than fifty years before the publication of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*, Tourgée nearly predicted the work when he said of the Confederacy: “The downfall of empire is always the epoch of romance” (p. 220). Tourgée was one of the first critics to take aim at the “plantation school” novelists who effaced slavery as a cause of the war, treated all Confederate soldiers as heroes, and turned African Americans into the stock characters of loyal retainers or dissipated freedmen. But he also grasped the special appeal of the Lost Cause. Were he alive today, he would understand better than most how the campaign by Mitchell’s estate to ban an African American’s parody of *Gone With the Wind* could come within a breath of victory. And he would have foreseen the futility of the outcry against John Ashcroft for referring to Lee, Jackson, and Davis as “southern patriots.” Tourgée lost *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896, Ashcroft became Attorney General in 2001, and, despite neo-Confederate whining to the contrary, the situation today is much as the *Afro-American* described it in 1913: “The South is in the saddle. . . . And the North has quietly allowed it to have its own way” (p. 390).

Many besides Bierce and Tourgée offered a counter-memory to the sentimentalism of reconciliation and the Lost Cause, and one of the great services done by Blight is to recover a host of these lesser-known dissenters. Here is George Washington Williams, the black veteran who published the first history of African American soldiers in the Civil War. There is Wilbur Siebert, the white history instructor who published tales of the Underground Railroad as an alternative, antislavery form of romantic memory (though many of these stories, like those of the “plantation school,” were infused with racist conventions and anxieties). And out of nowhere comes the Confederate raider John Mosby, who turned not only against the Lost Cause ideologues but against all who dared see romance in the savagery of war. Mosby is a particularly interesting case, for his dissent flowed from a vein of southern realism and self-criticism often overlooked in treatments of the postwar white South as monolithic in its devotion to the Lost Cause.

Nothing is monolithic in Blight’s book, least of all the black memory of the Civil War. African Americans were, of course, the most vocal critics of the reconciliationist impulse and the most vigilant keepers of the emancipationist flame. Yet, while they refused to relinquish their memories of slavery and jubilee, they devised no single strategy of what to do with those memories as they marched toward an uncertain future. Some groped pathetically for their past. Poor souls in the 1880s still placed advertisements seeking the whereabouts of relatives separated from them in the days of slavery. Others sought
REVIEWS IN AMERICAN HISTORY / DECEMBER 2001

556

to write slavery and emancipation into a dignified cycle of proud beginnings followed by suffering and future redemption. Out of such efforts was born Bishop Henry McNeal Turner’s millennial Ethiopianism and W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Star of Ethiopia* pageant. Because Blight tends to count general memories of slavery as Civil War memory—a move that may not sit well with historians persnickety about periodization—his source material is enormous and his task of sorting out themes becomes even more challenging. He detects no fewer than five strands of black Civil War memory. Yet, no matter how the design woven by these strands changed, the central tension was always around the place of slavery and emancipation in African American identity. The argument had started by at least the 1880s, when Alexander Crummell exhorted African Americans to “guard against . . . not the memory of slavery, but the constant recollection of it” (p. 316), and Frederick Douglass rejoined that the memory of slavery must be held close; it must not become a distant dream. The argument continues today.

Despite *Race and Reunion*’s sweeping scope, exhaustive research, and splendid prose, some readers may want more. No doubt a few will feel short-changed that the story ends in 1915. But after that date, the patterns of memory became so diffuse that, had Blight tried to move forward in time, he would have been forced to dull his interpretive edge. How much more is there to tell, anyway? Today’s squabbles over Confederate flags, Civil War battlefields, and slavery memorials all have precedents described by Blight, and if readers want to learn more about the recent history of such matters, they can turn to any number of excellent books.10

No book on Civil War memory can be all things to all people, yet certain historians may nonetheless be disappointed that Blight does not do more to cater to their specific interests or tastes. Historians of religion may point out that Blight is not as attentive to religious trends among whites as he is to those among African Americans. Although he repeats Andrew Delbanco’s claim that the Civil War “was the great divide between a culture of faith and a culture of doubt” (p. 244), he does not engage directly with Delbanco’s argument, or with Ann C. Rose’s thesis that memories of the war gave an edge to secular romanticism in its postwar competition with religious faith.11 Legal historians may wish that Blight had done more with the postwar Supreme Court. Although he discusses the *Civil Rights Cases* and *Plessy*, he might have said more about the Court’s distinctive, reconciliationist role in what Pamela Brandwein calls “the production of historical truth.”12 Historians of women will approve of Blight crediting white women such as Mildred L. Rutherford, the dynamo of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, with fueling the romantic-reconciliationist engine, just as they will nod at the leading role he gives to black women, such as the writer Frances E. W. Harper, in applying the realist-emancipationist brakes. But they may wonder, where
are the white female realists? Where is Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, whose *The Gates Ajar* (1869) was a bestseller that spoke frankly of the grief and bitterness bestowed by the war on the female survivors? Finally, those who like their history in a postmodern style may prefer a book like Charles Royster’s *The Destructive War* (1991), parts of which not only reveal the contested nature of memory but also attempt to reproduce the actual confusion of memory in jarring passages that rush us back and forth across time and space. Much of the jumbled quality of memory comes through in *Race and Reunion*, but Blight’s book is more traditional in its form than Royster’s, and readers will come away with a firmer analytical framework, a more ordered answer to the question of how Americans made sense of a sometimes senseless experience.

Blight ends on a note that is both cautionary and hopeful. After pointing to the first fifty years of reconciliationist Civil War memory as a prelude to the “future reckonings” of the modern civil rights movement’s assault on the “racial apartheid system . . . forged out of the reunion,” he concludes: “All memory is prelude” (p. 397). The cautionary message is simple: we are destined always to battle against the forces of collective—even contrived—forgetting. The hopeful message is more subtle. Much earlier in the book, Blight invokes Ernest Renan’s description of a nation as “a daily plebiscite” negotiating “memories” and “present-day consent,” a negotiation requiring much “forgetting” (p. 44). Blight might just as well have quoted Carlos Fuentes: “Our civilization is based on amnesia.” The implicit corollary of such statements is that a better, more humane civilization can be forged in the smithy of painful memory. Sweet public memories may bring healing, but only bitter memories can bring salvation. In restoring to the memory of the Civil War the savagery, heartlessness, and racism of that era, we allow for the possibility of a civilization based on justice rather than amnesia. Memory can destroy, but it also can redeem—a hopeful message indeed, and one that we are much in Blight’s debt for delivering.

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5. For southern memory and the war, see Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (2000); William C. Davis, *The Cause Lost: Myths
and Realities of the Confederacy (1996); Gaines M. Foster, Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865–1913 (1987); Thomas L. Connelly and Barbara L. Bellowes, God and General Longstreet: The Lost Cause and the Southern Mind (1982); and W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity (2000), which includes a number of essays touching on southern memory of the war; for the northern culture of conciliation, see Nina Silber, The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900 (1993); for the Grand Army of the Republic, see Stuart McConnell, Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865–1900 (1992); for studies of popular literature and the war, see Alice Fahs, The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861–1865 (2001); Lyde Sizer, The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850–1872 (2000); and Elizabeth Young, Disarming the Nation: Women’s Writing and the American Civil War (1999); for Civil War monuments, see Kirk Savage, Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America (1997).

6. For Lincoln, see Merrill D. Peterson, Lincoln in American Memory (1994); for Lee, see Gary W. Gallagher, Lee and His Generals in War and Memory (1998); Alan T. Nolan, Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History (1991); and Thomas L. Connelly, The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society (1977); a book on Grant in American memory is being prepared by Joan Waugh; for Pickett, see Lesley J. Gordon, General George E. Pickett in Life and Legend (1998).


8. On Pickett’s Charge, see Carol Reardon, Pickett’s Charge in History and Memory (1997); on The Wilderness, see Stephen Cushman, Bloody Promenade: Reflections on a Civil War Battle (1999); Gettysburg in American Culture, 1863–1938 is being prepared by Amy J. Kinsel.


10. Tony Horwitz, Confederates in the Attic (1998), and Jim Cullen, The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past (1995) are the two best starting points for the study of Civil War memory in recent history.


