

### The Power Of Place

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#### Recommended Citation

Knull, Morgan N. (2002) "The Power Of Place," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 .  
Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol4/iss1/4>

## Feature Essay

### THE POWER OF PLACE

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Winter 2002

**Shackel, Paul A.** *PERSPECTIVES FROM A FIELD AND AFAR: Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape*. University Press of Florida, \$59.95  
ISBN 813021049

The Power of Place The political significance of death and memorialization is a persistent theme in history and literature. A triumphant but doomed Achilles desecrated the body of Hector before relinquishing it to the Trojans; "unknown soldiers" are retrieved from distant battlefields and reinterred on native soil; the Bolsheviks burned the bodies of the Romanovs lest Russian royalists venerate a public gravesite. Even the recent terrorist attack on the United States has summoned symbolizations of grief and remembrance.

In the introduction to **Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape**, University of Maryland anthropologist Paul A. Shackel pledges that the essays he has edited in this collection will "demonstrate how the memories associated with highly visible objects are always being constructed, changed, challenged, or ignored." As such rhetoric suggests, the anthropologists and historians who join Shackel in contributing to the volume generally approach their subjects with a postmodernist interpretative framework that stresses how race/gender/class considerations undergird the public memorialization of famous figures and events.

Postmodernism has served as a useful corrective to impersonal historical accounts, even if some practitioners engage in a different kind of reductiveness by imposing tendentious theories on the actions of earlier generations, without ever considering facts and events within their own context. It might be said that some of the dozen essays in this collection are informed by postmodernism; others are deformed by it. Six are pertinent to Civil War studies; the other six address topics ranging from the memorialization of George Washington's birthplace to the revitalization of Baltimore's Camden Yards. Audrey J. Horning

opens the collection with a piece entitled "Of Saints and Sinners: Mythic Landscapes of the Old and New South." A historical archologist at Queen's University of Belfast, Horning contrasts two New Deal projects in Virginia: the restoration of Jamestown Island to its colonial appearance and the return of Shenandoah National Park to its pre-settlement landscape. Horning asks: "What pasts do we choose to remember, and why?"

Two essays address battlefield interpretation. In "The Third Battle of Manassas: Power, Identity, and the Forgotten African-American Past" archologist Erika K. Martin Seibert decries the focus on battles and troop movements at Manassas. Despite Manassas having been the site of two important battles, Seibert insists that social history be given equal place in park interpretation.

The essay by National Park Service archologist Martha Temkin, "Freeze-Frame, September 17, 1862: A Preservation Battle at Antietam National Battlefield Park" is more commendable. Temkin traces Antietam's evolution from a military cemetery to a full-fledged tourist destination. But in the early 1990s, the National Park Service decided to remove access roads built in the 1890s and to forbid construction of further memorials. This approach, known as "freezing," is controversial because it interprets a site in a date-specific way, rather than permitting the site to organically evolve. It creates a conundrum for postmodernists, who generally appreciate historical evolution, except when it leads to commercial development that encroaches upon park boundaries.

Three essays tackle the memorialization of Civil War dead. Paul Shackel, in "The Robert Gould Shaw Memorial: Redefining the Role of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry" recounts the history of Augustus Saint-Gaudens's famous sculpture on Boston Common. In an essay entitled "Buried in the Rose Garden: Levels of Meaning at Arlington National Cemetery and the Robert E. Lee Memorial," Laurie Burgess of the Smithsonian Institution contends that the creation of Arlington cemetery can be understood as "an act of war," in which "an army of the dead took the battlefield." The collection closes with National Park Service historian Dwight T. Pitcaithley's balanced "Abraham Lincoln's Birthplace Cabin: The Making of an American Icon."

**Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape** offers readers a valuable sourcebook, with the best essays illustrating how the prevailing approach to historical interpretation has evolved over generations. But

for a collection that so directly addresses death and memory, the essays are strangely silent on the religious dimension to memorialization. A more poignant treatment of this subject can be found in John Keegan's elegant account of the post-World War I creation of British military cemeteries, "There's Rosemary for Remembrance" (The American Scholar, Summer 1997).

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