

Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause

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Recommended Citation

Mancini, Matthew J. (2012) "Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 14 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.3.09

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss3/8>

Review

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Summer 2012

Towns, W. Stuart *Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause*.
University of Alabama Press, 2 \$37.50 ISBN 978-0-8173-1752-2

Exploring the Lost Cause

Arriving as it does well after celebrated works on the same general subject by Charles Reagan Wilson, Gaines M. Foster, William C. Davis, David Blight, David Goldfield, and a raft of historians of scarcely less talent and repute, W. Stuart Towns's *Enduring Legacy* inevitably raises the question of whether it was really a necessary project. My answer is an earnest if qualified Yes, and for three reasons: first, it is the only work that adheres rigorously to the author's specific field of expertise in rhetorical analysis—a field in which he has earned a distinguished reputation over a long career; second, it is an unmatched repository of Lost Cause rhetoric that will serve as a convenient reference work in its own right; and finally, the book's extensive and meticulous bibliography and notes furnish direct access to the myriad of numbingly repetitive speeches that constitute Towns's source material.

The author takes a strong or maximalist position on the issue of the social effects of oratory in the American south, from the late 1860s down nearly to the present, maintaining that "twentieth-century southerners learned much of how they were going to think about the North, about the Civil War and Reconstruction, and about themselves from the rhetoric of the Lost Cause," and even that the orators he surveys "created the fabric of public memory" (x). Acknowledging that other forms of cultural expression—such as textbooks, novels, and films—also played key roles in shaping cultural perceptions and crystallizing mythical narratives, he nonetheless privileges oratory as the decisive means by which collective self-understanding in the south was shaped. To that end, he dedicates a brief but crucial chapter to southern oratory and its role in civic education both before and after the Civil War, convincingly showing that ceremonial occasions, invariably including several orations, were

far more frequent in the South than in other regions, for a much longer period of time, and that they were consistently identified by southern writers and spokespersons as having been fundamental to their awareness of southern distinctiveness. The “ceremonial public address and ritual ... was the *major* influence shaping the culture of the post-Civil War South,” he contends (147n5; emphasis added).

Having read a staggering (both in quantity and quality) accumulation of speeches from throughout the South delivered over the course of a century and a half, Towns settles on three ceremonial and ritualistic events for analysis: Confederate Memorial Day, Confederate veterans’ reunions, and dedication ceremonies for Confederate monuments.

All three events had a liturgical structure, with oratory at its center. And the orations themselves fall into clear thematic patterns: the defense of the Confederacy, the Republican Party as a scapegoat, white supremacy, Confederate martyrology, the sufferings of Reconstruction, the sweet relief of Redemption, the bright future of the modern South.

The melodies are familiar, but never before have they been analyzed with such scrupulous attention to each minor chord and key. In seceding, orators invariably claimed, the southerners were merely following the example of the founding fathers—“the right of a free people, of Anglo-Saxon blood and history, to choose for themselves the government which would but promote their prosperity and happiness,” according to South Carolina clergyman Ellison Capers. Defense of slavery was integral to this theme. In the late nineteenth century, in contrast to a century later, Lost Cause orators frequently acknowledged that slavery was, as General John B. Hood told a reunion in Charleston, “the secret motor, the mainspring of the war” (48). But the slaves flourished, as John B. Gordon told the citizens of Augusta, Georgia in 1887, under the “patriarchal care and kind government of the southern masters, and ... the holy teachings of southern Christian women” (52). The slaves came to us, bellowed William Boggs in 1881, as “debased savages,” but “under our tuition they were taught the habits of order, decency, and industry. Under us they forsook their bestial idolatry” (51).

The war itself produced its Trinity of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis, and how fortunate we are to be transported to New Orleans in 1881, to hear Davis himself give the oration at the dedication of the fifty-foot

Stonewall Jackson statue in the Metairie Cemetery, and proclaim: "Jackson's character and conduct so filled the measure of his glory that no encomium could increase or adorn it" (83). As to the southern defeat, it was simply an inevitable consequence of northern demographic and industrial superiority; indeed "the bloody sacrifice of lives it involved was a matter of slight consequence to the Federal Government," explained Wade Hampton in a eulogy of Robert E. Lee, because "the mercenaries of Europe and the slaves of the South could be used as substitutes for the patriots of the North" (90-91).

Towns maintains, based on solid evidence, that white southerners considered Reconstruction to have been worse than the Civil War. The postwar years were "one writhing, seething mass of rapine, debauchery and lust," declaimed W. M. Hammond in 1903 (98); they are remembered as "the long, long carnival of folly, the saturnalia of vice and corruption, during which a black flood seemed all but to engulf ourselves as a race," according to Mississippian John Sharp Williams in 1904; to John Temple Graves it was a time "foul with the odors of civil rights and race amalgamation" (98, 99).

Rather unexpected at first, then, is the fact that sectional reconciliation became, in the late nineteenth century, an equally emphasized subject for oratorical proficiency. Towns identifies the centennial year of 1876 and the subsequent Hayes-Tilden Compromise, followed by President Hayes's celebrated tour of the South, as the point of entry for this new theme. But as Towns observes, "it did not take much to prick the skin and find the blood of southern defensive attitudes" in such professions of sectional harmony (102). And he deftly elucidates the real nature of the cultural bargain that reconciliationist rhetoric tried to obscure: "By defending reconciliation and reunion, the white leadership of the South was enabled to 'win the peace' and establish a segregated South as the answer to the end of slavery and the 'Negro question'"—a point made familiar by David Blight a decade ago in *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (108). Indeed racism and white supremacy are the wellsprings of all variations of Lost Cause ideology, from the invocations of states' rights and constitutional liberty to the litany of Reconstruction's miseries. One of the first southerners to use the term Lost Cause, Edward Pollard, wrote: "This new cause—or rather the true question of the war revived—is the supremacy of the white race" (114).

Saturated though the South may have been by the hallucinations and self-justifications of the Lost Cause ideology, Towns nevertheless overstates the

hegemonic force of the narrative. As Towns undoubtedly understands, such narratives always contain within themselves elements of their own subversion. Indeed all myths contain seeds of their own destruction in the twists of their plots, characters, and metaphors, not to mention the prejudices and preferences of their interpreters; and no ideological or mythical edifice of belief and delusion can claim to exercise exclusive and unbroken domination over an entire culture. Even in the South—even in the white South—there were murmurs and echoes of dissent and emerging counternarratives to the Lost Cause. This is not to underestimate the degree of repression and conformity enforced on southerners' range of beliefs, but the very fact of the fury that was directed at dissenting voices, from George Washington Cable to John Spencer Bassett and W. J. Cash, signifies the pressure building against the Lost Cause over the course of its protracted and still-enduring career. But there is a certain flatness to Towns's presentation, a literalness even, that, in the end, short-circuits any discussion of such countervailing story lines.

In recent decades, except for the fact that slavery, as a cause of the Civil War, has been dropped from the checklist of obligatory themes, the basic content of the rhetoric is little changed from that of a century ago. And despite the consensus of contemporary professional historians about the realities of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Redemption, many elements of the myth remain an American, not just a southern, story; as historian Alan Nolan argued and as Blight showed in great detail, they became the "national memory" (13).

"The American South has lived a dream and in a dream for generations," Towns writes (xvii). In this work, carefully constructed from an abundance of source material, he has shone bright lamps on the hazy and kaleidoscopic episodes of reality, delusion, myth, dread, hope, and desire that this particular dream struggles to express.

Matthew J. Mancini is professor and chair of the Department of American Studies at Saint Louis University. His books include One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South and Alexis de Tocqueville and American Intellectuals: From His Times to Ours.