

Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War

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Review

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Nelson, Megan Kate *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War*.
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New Approach to the Civil War's Legacy

No American in the spring of 1861, Northerner or Southerner, white or black, free or slave, could have imagined the scale and devastating longterm effects of the war that would soon engulf them. If the sectional conflict generated a great deal of antebellum and early-war posturing expressing the fear of seeing one's homeland in ruins and at the mercy of a conquering foe, or the corresponding desire of reducing one's enemy to such ruins, those expressions were more rhetorical than real. It became clear soon enough, however, that the Civil War would create countless physical ruins accompanied by just as many psychic ones, both types more shocking in the moment and more persistent for years to come than anyone could have thought possible. Perhaps most disturbing of all, these ruins were made by Americans fighting themselves.

Hundreds of cities and towns, fields and forests, and houses, plantations, and farms would suffer as armies marched, cut, dug, fought, and plundered their way through the landscape, creating an almost ruin(ed) nation in the very process of determining whether it would survive as one nation or two. Soldiers bore most of the human cost of that process, with many thousands dead and many thousands more wounded, some of them disfigured.

Participants and observers often referred to this process as *ruination*, and if that word seems quaint and colloquial to us now, its nineteenth-century definition as "the fact or state of being ruined" captures both the context and the spirit of Megan Kate Nelson's fresh and bold study. Nelson, a lecturer in history and literature at Harvard, is the author of *Trembling Earth* (University of Georgia Press, 2009), a cultural history of the Okefenokee Swamp of south Georgia and north Florida. *Ruin Nation*, which "considers how and why soldiers and civilians smashed things to pieces and then examines how they understood

the debris," based on extensive and imaginative research in, and is a convincing interpretation of, wartime sources and relevant specialized studies in social history, cultural history, environmental history, and military history (9).

Nelson has identified four broad classifications of ruins made by the Civil War: urban ruins, of cities ruined by armies for various military and political reasons; domestic ruins, of homes, and especially private spaces and possessions within them, ruined by soldiers demonstrating their power over civilians; natural ruins, of forests, stands of trees, and even individual trees, ruined by armies building roads and camps or clashing in battle; and human ruins, of soldiers ruined by bullets or shells, dead or with limbs, organs, and nerves shattered or gone, and with their families often devastated as well. She describes how and why such ruins were created, examines their immediate effects on divided Americans and their landscape, and employs wartime and postwar writings and photographs or engravings in popular weeklies to make ruination more tangible. Nelson deftly gauges the impact the process had on Americans' hearts and minds as well as on their popular culture, for years and even generations after 1865. The ruins created by and ruination wrought by the war did not end when the shooting stopped. A physical and psychological reconstruction, one in many ways more critical to the survival of the nation as a whole than political Reconstruction, was necessary but did not take place quickly or easily.

From the first few months of the war to its end, and for years afterward, the ruination of urban and domestic spaces inspired a debate over causes and responsibilities. The argument over what was and what was not civilized warfare and who had lost any claim to waging it was especially vigorous over the ruination of private property. For civilians unfortunate enough to be in ruined cities or landscapes, emotions already frayed by the destruction of business districts and public institutions were often torn apart by what they believed was a profanation of their homes and their very lives. Nelson contends that confrontations between soldiers and civilians, especially Yankee soldiers and Rebel women, were "as much acts of war as were artillery duels on the battlefield" (78). Because soldiers usually treated white and black, free and slave, all the same, they only emphasized civilians' utter helplessness in the face of the soldiers'—and by extension their army's, and their government's—power and will to do whatever they wished, for whatever reason. Such behavior generated a bitterness among many victims that time did little to soften, as they passed down memories, stories, and mementos to their descendants and their descendants' descendants. When a Federal soldier in South Carolina taunted civilians

watching their capital burn, “How do you like it, hey?” that sort of insult was remembered almost as long and as vividly as the burning of Columbia itself (51).

The armies that wrecked forests building roads or clearing spaces for camps viewed such work as accomplishing something worthwhile rather than destructive. They also, however, destroyed countless stands of virgin or well-established timber constructing earthworks and digging trenches or erecting wooden obstructions to fortify themselves, then fought battles in which flying metal shredded or splintered leaves, limbs, and trees. There was, even before the war ended, a fascination with forests—especially individual trees with bullets or shell fragments visibly lodged in them—as witnesses to history and relics of remembrance, and a feeling that as nature regenerated itself with new growth in forests and as grass grew up over the raw earth, the country might heal its own wounds with enough time.

If cities, homes, and landscapes are clear examples of places that were once intact but reduced to ruins, Nelson points out that human beings who were once intact could also be reduced to ruins themselves. “As minie balls whizzed through the air and shells exploded into hundreds of fragments,” she observes, “the war’s technologies unmade men” (161). In no previous American war did the numbers of participants, or the combination by which largely outdated close-range tactics, more modern weapons, and woefully inadequate medicine killed or maimed them, cause so much suffering. Nineteenth-century Americans were all too familiar with death, but not on such a scale or with results so spectacularly violent. The sight of, or even the thought of, bodies without limbs and limbs without bodies, of men unrecognizable to friends and family or unrecognizable even as human beings, was something unfamiliar, shocking, and deeply disturbing. Many of the wounded, so ruined that they viewed themselves, and were often viewed by others, as no longer men, might have wished they had died instead. “War promised to make both white and black soldiers into men,” Nelson reminds us. “However, wounds and amputations threatened the nature of that manhood in their assault on individual identity, humanity, and citizenship” (185). The ways in which veterans, their families, and their communities adjusted to, and gave or denied them praise and material aid for, such devastating personal losses, would be among the most significant responses to the human cost of the war for years to come.

Ruin Nation is original, sophisticated, and persuasive, giving us a new lens through which we can focus our attention on significant aspects of the Civil War

that we have never seen with such clarity. It should be read, and reread, by anyone hoping to understand what the war did to America, as opposed to what it did *for* it; what *ruination* meant to those who lived through it; and how it influenced the ways in which Americans since have viewed the central moment in our history.

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