

Sustaining Southern Identity: Douglas Southall Freeman and Memory in the Modern South

Nina Silber

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Review

Silber, Nina

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Dickson, Keith D. *Sustaining Southern Identity: Douglas Southall Freeman and Memory in the Modern South*. Louisiana State University Press, \$42.50 ISBN 978-0-8071-4004-8

Re-investigating Lost Cause Identity Creation

At the core of this book lies an important question: how did the Virginia journalist and famous Lee biographer, Douglas Southall Freeman, shape a particular approach to Confederate history that not only revealed a rigorous and “scientific” method, but also spoke to the concerns of white southerners of the time? Although seldom read today, Freeman was undoubtedly the foremost interpreter of the life of Robert E. Lee, and of the military command who served with the Confederate general. As editor of the *Richmond News Leader* between 1915 and 1949, Freeman also occupied an important role as a public figure and commentator in southern life, and was often in a position to meld his interpretations of the Confederate past with present-day issues.

Numerous works in recent years have, of course, explored various angles on white southern memory and, in particular, the fashioning of the Lost Cause. But Freeman presents a unique opportunity for understanding southern memory, offering us something beyond the hyperbole spouted by aging Confederate veterans or the ladies of the UDC. As a rigorously trained historian – he received his PhD in history from Johns Hopkins University - Freeman supposedly brought a scientific and intensely fact-based examination to his research. Moreover, Freeman did much of his historical work, not in the heyday of Confederate commemoration, – in the 1890s and early 1900s – but later, in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, during a time of dramatic change for the American South.

Keith Dickson, a professor of military studies at National Defense University, is aware of these distinctive contributions Freeman made to the white South’s historical memory and some of the most compelling sections in his book

deal with the ways the Virginia biographer tried, not always successfully, to bend his knowledge of the Confederacy to shed light on the current events of the 1930s and 40s. Still, in many ways, *Sustaining Southern Identity* leaves us wondering about the larger significance of Freeman and his work. Making frequent reference to terms such as “memory-truths”, “memory frameworks”, and identity, Dickson repeatedly makes the point that Freeman helped “perpetuate identity through an appeal to memory” (156). Yet these phrases often seem empty of specific content. For Dickson, modern southern identity seems to revolve around generic values of hard work, self-discipline, faith, and honor, yet surely there were particular issues southerners faced in the 1910s and after that may have prompted them to value certain qualities above others, or even led them to suppress certain points of information from the historical record. Did economic disparities in the twentieth century, for example, encourage historians, even scientifically trained ones like Freeman, to envision a more unified Confederate past where all white southerners stood together, regardless of social class? Did worries about military cataclysm, in the aftermath of World War I, prompt historians, again even rigorous researchers like Freeman, to accentuate particular qualities in the soldiers and leaders of the Confederacy? Perhaps most significant, though, is Dickson’s failure to fully address the question of race. Although Dickson occasionally modifies “southern identity” with the term “white”, the meaning of whiteness for Freeman and his audience receives little elaboration and the specific ways racial tensions in the twentieth century may have shaped Freeman’s history writing remains largely unexplored.

Finally, Dickson insists that, through the period of Freeman’s professional career, there continued to be a relatively unified entity that could be identified as a “southern collective memory” or “modern southern identity”, and that the work Freeman did gave these things substance. But as the South became more fully integrated in a modern national economy and as increasing numbers of southerners, even white ones, became less concerned with the Confederate past, one wonders how much Freeman really did speak for the entire (white) south.

Nina Silber, a professor of history at Boston University, has written extensively on the US Civil War, specifically on topics related to the war’s memory and gender relations. Her books include: The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900; Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War; and Gender and the Sectional Conflict.