

Through the Heart of Dixie: Sherman's March and American Memory

Kevin Levin

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Review

Levin, Kevin

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Rubin, Anne Sarah *Through the Heart of Dixie: Sherman's March and American Memory*. University of North Carolina Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9781469617770

Complicating Narratives of Sherman's March to the Sea

On November 15, 2014, the Georgia Historical Society commemorated the 150th anniversary of the beginning of "Sherman's March" with the dedication of a new marker. The text makes an explicit attempt to counter "popular myth" by insisting that Union soldiers "primarily destroyed only property used for waging war" and "liberated thousands of enslaved African Americans in their path." The result was nothing less than "the end of slavery and the reunification of the nation." Though some may choose to interpret this marker as a rejection of myth and an embrace of history others may interpret it as just another stage in our nation's struggle to come to terms with what Anne Rubin describes as "the most symbolically powerful aspect of the American Civil War."

Sherman's March looms large on our Civil War landscape of history and memory. *Through the Heart of Dixie* wrestles with both. The first chapter offers a concise overview of the events between the fall of Atlanta and the surrender of Joseph Johnston's Confederate army in North Carolina in late April 1865. With a foundation in place, Rubin proceeds to explore how various participants experienced the campaign, from the soldiers in Sherman's army to white and black civilians in Georgia and the Carolinas. It's a complex story that will challenge any attempt to demonize one side or cast as victims the other.

Tales of the destruction of homes and other infrastructure are central to any understanding of Sherman's March through Georgia, but most readers will be surprised to learn that the march represented only a portion of the campaign and that Union soldiers reserved their "anger, resentment, and vengeance" for the people of South Carolina. However, even along the march interactions between soldiers, civilians and slaves varied widely. Southern white women easily

recalled hardships faced as the result of the destruction of private property, but according to Rubin, in an attempt to cast themselves as defiant and brave defenders of the cause they also revealed the extent to which Union soldiers spared private property. Heart-warming stories about the interaction of soldiers and children also complicate the memory of what happened and suggests that the destruction wrought (at least in Georgia) was discriminate.

While Sherman's campaign led to the liberation of thousands of slaves and the ultimate end of the "peculiar institution," according to Rubin it was a "double-edged sword." For many former slaves memories of liberation and positive interactions with Union soldiers were often accompanied by abuse as well as starvation and other hardships associated with the movement and needs of so many men. No other example illustrates this point more clearly than the incident at Ebenezer Creek, which led to the abandonment of upwards of 5,000 former slaves by the Union XIV Corps. At the same time, the arrival of Union forces "fundamentally undermined white control, allowing African Americans to seize the moment, if they so chose."

One of the strongest chapters in the book deals with the memories of Union veterans or "Bummers" as they came to be known. In contrast to a growing literature that interprets the soldiers' experience in light of recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the author urges caution. Rubin argues that veterans did not express "remorse" or "discomfort" when they recalled the march, but did so in a "celebratory fashion" and as a "picnic, a lark, a time of good food and short marches."

Some readers will also be surprised by how Sherman himself faired in the eyes of white Southerners during the postwar period. In 1881, Sherman took part in Atlanta's International Cotton Exposition to help promote the city's industrial promise. Rubin suggests that Sherman's connection to the antebellum South, his potential to attract Northern investors to the "New South," and his resistance to Radical Reconstruction all contributed to why "white Southerners could now count him as a friend." Such a view stands in sharp contrast to Sherman's image in certain quarters and in popular culture today.

No study of Sherman's Georgia campaign in American memory would be complete without addressing the influence of Margaret Mitchell's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Gone With the Wind* and its Hollywood offshoot, produced by David O. Selznick in 1939. Hardcore fans will be rewarded by Rubin's close

reading of the book and movie as well as how edits in the latter were carried out to tone down some of the racial imagery and its portrayal of Union soldiers.

While this book should appeal to scholars and enthusiasts alike, those readers familiar with the field of Civil War memory studies may at times wish that Rubin had provided additional analysis of what factors led to certain narratives being privileged over others. The author states at the outset that she hoped to steer clear of an interpretation that rendered certain narratives "false" or "inaccurate" but it is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid such conclusions, especially when dealing with popular work of fiction or movie such as *Gone With the Wind*.

Such concerns aside, it is enough that Anne Rubin has helped us to make sense of why Sherman's March and the Civil War still resonates with many Americans today. In many ways this book is about more than the history and memory of what happened in Georgia and the Carolinas in 1864 and 1865. *Through the Heart of Dixie* offers important insights into how Americans have struggled to come to terms with the most important questions related to society and war, the legacy of slavery and the continue problems of race.

Kevin M. Levin lives in Boston, is the author of Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder (2012) and maintains the blog, Civil War Memory [http://cwmemory.com]. He is currently working on a book about Governor John Andrew and the raising of black troops in Massachusetts.