

Across the Bloody Chasm: The Culture of Commemoration Among Civil War Veterans

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Review

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Harris, M. Keith *Across the Bloody Chasm: The Culture of Commemoration among Civil War Veterans*. Louisiana State University Press, \$42.50 ISBN 9780807157725

A Slower, Less Traveled Road to Reunion

More than three quarters of a century ago historian Paul Buck traced *The Road to Reunion* (1938) that Americans traveled after the Civil War. Buck's Pulitzer Prize winning book rested on the premise that sectional reconciliation was a national priority after the Civil War that responsible and thoughtful Americans promoted and pursued. Although Buck displayed exaggerated respect for white southern sensibilities in his work, he nevertheless offered a thoughtful survey of the process of reconciliation during the half century after Appomattox. Six decades later David Blight's deservedly celebrated *Race and Reunion* (2001) covered some of the same ground, but with a profoundly different moral compass than the one evident in Buck's book. For Blight, the culture of reconciliation that triumphed after the Civil War represented not only a tragic distortion of the aims and accomplishments of the Union cause, but also a catastrophic repudiation of the role of African Americans in the conflict and American history more broadly. White southerners and northerners had re-forged a shared national identity by accentuating their shared white racial heritage and eliding the deep ideological differences that had justified the bloodiest conflict in American history. Erasing blacks from the national narrative was the essential prerequisite for the robust nationalism that Americans had fashioned by the early twentieth century.

While Blight's interpretation has been the foundation for subsequent work on the commemoration and cultural memory of the Civil War, *Across the Bloody Chasm* joins a growing list of important recent scholarship, such as Caroline Janney's *Remembering the Civil War* (2013), that challenge Blight's conclusions. M. Keith Harris calls into serious question the extent to which the

pursuit of national reconciliation carried the day in the late nineteenth century United States. At issue is not merely the timing of the eventual triumph of a reconciliationist ethos but whether sectional sensibilities were ever sufficiently mitigated to even warrant the claim that a culture of reunion did triumph.

In this uncommonly well written and concise book, Harris revisits the commemorative work of Union and Confederate veterans. Because some of this ground has been covered by other scholars (e.g., Gaines Foster, Barbara Gannon, and Stuart McConnell) a skeptic might ask what is new here. The simple answer is that Harris discerns very different motivations for and consequences from the commemorative work of veterans than do his predecessors. Harris stresses the intensity of the veterans' sectional sensibilities and draws our attention to the veterans' repeated refusals to temper those sensibilities.

Harris especially foregrounds the role that the memory of the prisoner of war camps played in fueling postwar sectional animosities. Too often the prisoner of war accounts that flooded the booksellers of the late nineteenth century have been discounted by scholars as untrustworthy, overwrought, and hyperbolic special pleading instead of as important contributions to a long cultural tradition that extended from colonial captivity narratives to antebellum slave narratives and postwar military autobiographies. Harris mines not only the familiar prison narratives of Andersonville, Camp Douglass, and other notorious camps, but also previously underutilized regimental histories written during the late nineteenth century. These diverse portraits of the prison experience are bursting with bitter denunciations of the brutality and inhumanity of the camps and the prison guards. Given that roughly 400,000 soldiers had been prisoners of war, the postwar speeches and memoirs that recalled their experiences spoke to a large audience who were not likely to be foot soldiers for postwar reconciliation.

In subsequent chapters Harris portrays Union and Confederate commemoration as dialectical opposites. Union veterans were adamant that Confederates had committed treason; northerners were willing to concede the valor of their enemy but not the legitimacy of their cause. Nor were Union veterans willing to downplay the importance of slavery as a cause of the war or to trivialize the significance of slavery's destruction. Confederates, in sharp contrast, were unwilling to accept paeans to their courage unless the justice of their cause was also acknowledged. Nor would they surrender any ground regarding their moral superiority to northerners by conceding that slavery was either immoral or had been the proximate cause of the war.

Across the Bloody Chasm makes two especially important contributions. First, Harris makes a compelling case that the reconciliationist impulse of the late nineteenth century was not driven by veterans. Of course, some expressed support for reconciliation in *Century* magazine or during orations, but most did not. To the contrary, to the extent that the cause of national reconciliation advanced, it did so in spite of the opposition of veterans. After reading Harris' book, one gets the sense that Union and Confederate veterans perhaps shared little more than frustration, bitterness, and even disappointment at failing to best their wartime foes in the postwar memory wars. Second, although Harris does not explicitly explain the ascendance of the culture of reconciliation in the twentieth century United States, his argument clarifies its timing. As the Civil War veterans died off after 1910, professional historians, popular culture impresarios (e.g. D. W. Griffith), and the civic nationalism that prevailed during the New Deal broadened and deepened the influence of the culture of reconciliation that had previously been contested and even held in check. Historians who focused on the mildness of American slavery and supposed evils of Reconstruction, song writers, movie directors, and novelists who exploited the "romance" of the Old South, and public figures eager to move away from divisive definitions of American identity all played important roles in tamping down inherited sectional resentments. M. Keith Harris is to be commended for clarifying why the process of national reconciliation took much longer than we have previously recognized and the role that Civil War veterans played in it.

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