

Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America

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Review

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Marten, James *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8078-3476-3

Reintegrating Back into Society

James Marten has written an anecdotal and analytical study of Union and Confederate veterans in the years following the Civil War. Although originally intended as a “general history of Civil War veterans,” Marten admits that his choice of sources means “the best-adjusted men at times fade from the narrative, and the less fortunate, marginalized men take center stage” (3). Likewise, the author indicates sometimes that the nature of the issues covered results in Union veterans receiving greater coverage than Confederates, because they affected northerners more. African Americans are virtually left out of the study, Marten confesses, because they tend to not to appear in his sources, overly complicate the analysis, and their experience has been covered adequately elsewhere.

While it would be easy to criticize James Marten for limiting his study, reading *Sing Not War* is proof enough that he made a wise choice. Marten’s book thoughtfully considers a large number of significant and interesting issues while managing to wade through a mass of sources created by and about the best documented group of war veterans up to that time. That is, while the question that informs his study—“How did veterans live, and how were they seen to live?”—may seem quite simple, answering it is not (5).

The main sources that Marten consults for his study are not Civil War pension files, which have become a favorite source, particularly for scholars interested in ordinary Union veterans, but “testimony to both congressional and GAR investigators of soldiers’ homes in the 1880s” and “soldiers’ newspapers” (18). The first source documents the downtrodden veterans—disabled, sick, or simply down on their luck. The second articulated and advocated for veterans’

concerns, and provides a good sense of what was on their minds.

James Marten then utilizes these sources and others in the six chapters of *Sing Not War*. Chapter 1 covers the transitional period from military to civilian life. Not surprisingly, Marten finds the transition to be fraught with many difficulties, both for the victors and the vanquished. Returning veterans on both sides found themselves on the journey home vulnerable to con artists, thieves, and other criminals. Even if they made it home without incident, some former soldiers had difficulty readjusting to civilian life, particularly after, as Marten quotes James Garfield, the “wild life of the army” (51). Having often spent critical years of their young adult life in military service, veterans often felt themselves having fallen behind their counterparts that stayed home, and actually found some elements of the population distrustful of former soldiers, finding them damaged and difficult to deal with. Marten also explores Confederate veterans coping with a homecoming bereft of the racial order they had left behind, which fueled the growth of regulator groups in the South as ex-soldiers accustomed and skilled in violence used it to reassert the dominance of white manhood.

Chapter 2 examines the many men left disabled by the Civil War. James Marten asserts disabled veterans elicited sympathy, but the general population never quite could determine “a workable philosophy about how society should deal with men crippled by war” (77). This was particularly the case when the disabilities were psychological rather than physical, and especially if the victim self-medicated with alcohol. Marten admits that one of great problems analyzing posttraumatic stress syndrome among Civil War veterans was a contemporary lack of understanding of the phenomenon, not only by society but also by the veterans themselves. Instead, reformers and soldiers’ homes focused on alcohol as the root cause of veterans’ problems rather recognizing its abuse as a symptom of the psychological issues they faced.

The commercialization of Civil War veterans is the fascinating topic of Chapter 3. Marten identifies a variety of ways veterans and others sought to cash in on ex-soldiers. Veterans’ reunions or “encampments” provided one such opportunity either selling veterans mementos or services. With the economic boost provided by these gatherings, cities North and South competed to host them, sometimes even wooing veterans that had been enemies during the war. The old battlefields too became commercialized, as local and regional leaders sought to maximize the money spent by visitors. A brisk trade even developed

over Civil War relics and collectibles both among veterans and the general population.

Chapter 4 deals with old soldiers' homes and communities founded by veterans, the former topic already having received book-length treatment in studies by R. B. Rosenberg (Confederate) and Patrick J. Kelly (Union). Hence, this chapter is arguably the least original in *Sing Not War*, especially for the portion dealing with Confederates. It also should be noted James Marten's discussion of Union soldiers' homes relies heavily on sources from the Milwaukee branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, the facility with the records most accessible to the author. Nonetheless, Marten manages to put the history of old soldiers' homes in a broader perspective than previous scholarship, adroitly describing them within the larger context of institution-based social welfare in the Gilded Age. And his scholarship on communities founded by Civil War veterans is truly ground-breaking.

Civil War Pensions are the topic of Chapter 5, constituting another subject that has received a good deal of attention from scholars in recent years (including the reviewer). Marten wisely frames the chapter as a study of the tension in American society over which or if any veterans deserved payments from government. Americans, according to author, were ambivalent about the Civil War pension system. While most people did not think ex-soldiers should suffer for a lack of means given their wartime sacrifices, there always existed an element of distrust that many veterans who received pensions were not really worthy given their dissolute behavior. There also existed the perception that veterans greedily drew more money from the public treasury in pensions than they really deserved, inordinately burdening taxpayers and leaving other national needs insufficiently funded. For their part, James Marten finds, Civil War veterans angrily refuted these criticisms as the product of ungrateful generations that grown up since the war who did not appreciate the value of their service and the heavy debt of the nation owed ex-soldiers. While these insights are nothing really new to those scholars who have already studied the Civil War pension system, Marten describes them in an articulate and insightful fashion.

The last chapter of *Sing Not War* addresses the question of historical memory and veterans' identity. The author finds Civil War veterans to be surprisingly insecure. According to James Marten, "the old soldiers spent much of the Gilded Age justifying their existence" (248). They believed their military service gave them a "moral authority" in addressing the nation's issues, but

found that civilians did not always grant them it. Indeed, Marten asserts that something of a divide existed among veterans themselves, between those that had participated in significant combat and those that had served more in support roles. The former group believed they had greater moral authority, while the latter group argued their service was just as valuable and entitled them as well to make the same claims on the nation. Marten also finds tensions, despite the growing acceptance of sectional reconciliation, between Union and Confederate veterans over asserting moral authority on national issues and wartime memory. Union veterans tended to grant themselves greater moral authority than their former enemies, something that Confederates were not willing to concede.

So although, at times, lacking inclusiveness and originality, as well as perhaps too restrictive in its sources, on the whole, James Marten's *Sing Not War* represents a worthy addition to the growing body of scholarship on Civil War veterans. For readers new to the topic, it represents a well-written introduction to the world of the men that served in and survived the Civil War. For scholars knowledgeable on this topic, Marten's study pulls together many familiar threads and adds some new ones, thoughtfully weaving both. Either way, it is a good book.

Donald R. Shaffer is the author of After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans, which won the Peter Seaborg Award for Civil War Scholarship in 2005. More recently he published (with Elizabeth Regosin), Voices of Emancipation: Understanding Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction through the U.S. Pension Bureau Files (2008). He teaches exclusively online and can be contacted at shafferd@faculty.uuu.edu.