

American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era

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Review

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Understanding Civil Rights-Era Commemoration

The Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement are “forever intertwined in American history and mythology,” David Blight writes on page 2 of his demanding, intelligent, and ultimately frustrating new book, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era*. In *American Oracle*, Blight, the foremost historian of the Civil War in American memory, takes on the project of exploring the meaning of the Civil War at the time of its 100th anniversary, which happened to take place as black protestors in the South were challenging Jim Crow and demanding the right to vote. Blight opens the book with Martin Luther King’s famous “I Have a Dream Speech,” which sought to paint the movement as doing the work unfinished by the Civil War. But, as Blight warns us, such understandings of the Civil War were hardly mainstream. Most Americans, including the official Centennial Commission, sought to keep the Civil War shrouded in myths of the shared valor of northern and southern soldiers, and far from the politically divisive questions of Emancipation, the failure of Reconstruction, or the status of African Americans one hundred years after Appomattox.

How were American writers then “searching for the meaning of their history during the Centennial commemoration” (3)? To answer that question, Blight focuses on four celebrated intellectuals and writers who tackled the meaning of the Civil War in the 1960s: Robert Penn Warren, Bruce Catton, Edmund Wilson, and James Baldwin. These writers, Blight argues, are important not only because they wrote widely read works that helped shape the understanding of the Civil War, but because each of them managed to do something Blight considers vital to honest Civil War memory: to portray the war as tragic. The Civil War, Blight charges, became a mythic national epic after it ended, as Americans on both

sides found ways to sidestep its “disillusioning tragedy” (4). His four chosen writers, however, understood the war through a tragic sensibility. They also, he argues, each offered something of their own philosophy of history. His analysis thus engages not only with each man’s writings, but also their understanding of the workings of the world and their theories of history.

In four lengthy chapters, each focusing on the life and work of one of the four writers, Blight offers an illuminating intellectual history of the place of the Civil War in American thought in the early 1960s. Blight begins, fittingly, with Robert Penn Warren, a southerner who was schooled in the romance of the Lost Cause by his veteran grandfather, but who came to hate ideology and to understand how history not only shaped, but indeed infected and rebuked the present. In his masterful novel, *All the King’s Men*, Warren explored the legacies of the Civil War, which he saw as harsh and bitter. Warren, Blight writes, “embraced tragedy ... as a conception of the human condition,” and his work suggested that the history of the Civil War provided an illuminating, if disturbing window, into the evils of human nature (51). Blight emphasizes how Warren criticized the sentimentalism of both the North and the South. The war had allowed northerners to adopt a self-righteous sense of their own moral superiority, while southerners embraced a “Lost Cause” tradition that provided an excuse for all of their grievances. Both versions of the war were hypocritical. If the war had any positive legacy to Warren, it was in what he saw as its political affects. Although Blight rightly questions Warren’s claim that the war led Americans to eschew ideological politics in favor of pragmatism, he praises Warren’s attack on sentimental and pious versions of Civil War histories.

Bruce Catton, the most popular writer of Civil War histories in this era, provides an interesting contrast to Warren. Catton, a northerner, grew up hearing romantic stories of Union veterans, stories that—unlike Warren—he never fully outgrew. His popular histories of the war focus on the average Union soldier who sought to survive horrible battlefield conditions. Blight emphasizes Catton’s powerful portrayal of the war as horrific and tragic, although in some ways the choice to include Catton is curious. As critical as Blight is of the redemptive strain in American historical memory, he seems to excuse Catton’s framing of the war as a “‘tragic’ bloodletting” from which the nation emerged better, stronger, and even, Catton argues, more unified (104). Blight admits that Catton wanted to put the Civil War into a larger story of national progress and that Catton had very little to say about race in his large body of work. In some ways, it would have made more sense to include Catton—who Blight sees as the

epitome of 1960s mainstream views of the war—as the example that the other three writers were working against.

Certainly, the contrast between Catton and the third writer Blight analyzes, Edmund Wilson, is striking. Wilson was a literary scholar who developed a deep hatred for wars and an even deeper suspicion of ideologically-driven politics in his early years. By the time he produced his masterful study of the literature of the Civil War, *Patriotic Gore*, he had become a sharp critic of the Cold War, of American foreign policy, and of nationalistic power. As a result, he rejected any ideological reasons for the war and portrayed it as a bleak tale of blood and gore with no redemptive aspects. Indeed, Wilson adopted the view that the war resulted from the power-hungry North's repression of the South's legitimate desire to secede, and the North's victory eventually led to the corruption of the money-obsessed Gilded Age. Race plays almost no role here, since Wilson did not believe that either side was really fighting about slavery. Blight thoughtfully explores, and rejects, the contemporary criticism of Wilson for not including major black writers like Frederick Douglass in his analysis. Since most black culture at the time was still invisible to whites, Blight suggests, we should see Wilson's lack of attention to black writers as "a measure of the distance we have traveled and as a reminder that the Civil War was actually *about something* beyond the blood of the war years" (168). That was something Wilson either didn't seem to understand or could not recognize.

James Baldwin, the final writer Blight analyzes, did of course recognize that the Civil War was about something, and the great black writer took it upon himself in the 1960s to convince white people of that too. In response to the depoliticized and sentimentalized Civil War Centennial, Baldwin assumed a strident voice of dissent, pushing whites to face the nation's history of slavery and racism honestly and fully. Baldwin's goal, Blight makes clear, "was to destabilize the complacency at the heart of American historical consciousness" (209). Blight praises Baldwin for recognizing that Americans tended to turn their painful histories into stories of cheerful progress, as well as for his sense of the tragic nature of America's racial history. Ultimately, Baldwin hoped that if white Americans could be forced to confront the past honestly, the nation might be able to forge a new way of thinking about its history that would enable it to eventually move beyond the divisions left by the Civil War.

That is, perhaps, what Blight wants too, but *American Oracle* never fully resolves the central tension of its framing. Although Blight begins the book with

Martin Luther King and throughout suggests that the major problem with the dominant Civil War memory at the time of the Centennial was its unwillingness to deal with unresolved issues of race and black equality, his overarching argument is that memory of the Civil War must be informed by a sense of tragedy. Yet a tragic sense of the war—as his analysis of these four writers makes clear—does not necessarily require any confrontation with issues of race. Neither Wilson nor Catton dealt with race in their work, yet both, according to Blight, wrote with a sense of the war’s tragedy.

Given this complication, it’s surprising that Blight only spends a few paragraphs explaining why a tragic sensibility of history is superior to a redemptive one. I also would have been eager to hear more of Blight’s thoughts about what seemed to be the fundamentally ahistorical philosophies of history put forth in some of these works. Warren, for example, viewed the main cause of the war as man’s dark and evil nature, and sought historical answers not in specific contexts “but in the stuff of geological time,” Blight writes on page 36. Catton, meanwhile, portrayed the war as an “unfathomable *mystery*” that contained some sort of “holy grail” for understanding the “human condition” (97). And Wilson saw the Civil War, like all wars, as caused by the “irresistible instinct of power to expand itself” (146). Are interpretations that view the Civil War as mystical or as the result of the evils of human nature truly historical? Blight could do more to analyze why the Civil War seems to call forth such seemingly transhistorical interpretations.

American Oracle will be of great interest to scholars of the Civil War and of Civil War memory, and scholars of the civil rights era will also find much to ponder in this immensely learned study of the range of understandings of the Civil War during the height of the civil rights movement. But they may find themselves wishing that Blight had put forth even more of his own voice to reconcile what seem to be some of the inconsistent or paradoxical aspects of this work.

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