

Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know About the Civil War

Megan Kate Nelson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Nelson, Megan Kate (2008) "Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know About the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.10.4.8

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss4/8>

Review

Nelson, Megan Kate

Fall 2008

Gallagher, Gary W. *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know About the Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, \$28.00 hardcover ISBN 9780807832066

Picturing the Civil War

Gary W. Gallagher has done his fair share of shaping what historians know about the Civil War. In his latest book, *Causes Won, Lost and Forgotten*, he investigates how modern film and artworks determine what the American public knows about the conflict. In so doing, he identifies four different but interrelated interpretive traditions that have appeared in these popular media over time: the Lost Cause, the Union Cause, the Emancipation Cause, and the Reconciliation Cause. All four of these narratives are most likely familiar to scholars of Civil War memory but several of Gallagher's arguments in this context are new: Hollywood has increasingly shunned the Lost Cause narrative while Civil War artists have increasingly embraced it; and in recent popular culture, Americans "have lost sight of nationalism [the Union cause] as a motivating force" during the war (13).

Gallagher begins by presenting thumbnail sketches of these four interpretive traditions in the first chapter and then moves on to analyze the Confederate tradition in film in chapter two. His argument here is that while early films like *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) introduced millions of Americans to the Lost Cause, the trend in Hollywood has been increasingly critical of Confederate romanticism. *Shenandoah* (1965) began the assault and the post-Glory films of the 1990s (*Pharaoh's Army*, *Andersonville*, and *Ride with the Devil*, especially) reveal that Lost Cause themes fell out of favor during this period, probably due to the rise of multiculturalism and national trends "regarding public displays of Confederate symbols" (55).

There were exceptions, of course; *Gettysburg* (1993) and *Gods and Generals* (2003), with their focus on Confederate generals, the eastern theater, and the bravery of common soldiers in addition to their erasure of slavery from the narrative of the Civil War, served up “a hearty helping of Lost Cause fare” (73). Gallagher is clearly captivated by these two films; he analyzes them more closely than the others. What remains unclear is why such films were produced and released at these specific moments. Perhaps *Gettysburg*, which was filmed in the wake of the victorious First Gulf War, was riding a wave of pro-war sentiment while *Gods and Generals* sought to provide a vision of glorious warfare on the eve of the invasion of Iraq. Gallagher states in the introduction that he will not engage in a discussion of America’s current war (14) but avoiding such contextual arguments undermines his point that Civil War films tell us more about those who make them than about the conflict itself.

In chapter three, Gallagher turns to the other three narrative traditions: emancipation, reconciliation, and the Union. As the Lost Cause began to lose favor, Hollywood “brought emancipation and black people to the forefront in ways virtually unknown in earlier generations” (93). It was *Glory*, of course, that marked this turning point; the film’s suggestion that the war was a struggle to end slavery and that this fight for freedom ennobled the northern cause has impacted most Civil War films since 1989. Gallagher assumes that the reason Americans find this narrative so compelling is because it somehow reassures them about our nation’s ideals of freedom for all. But does this really explain the strength of this narrative, which has so effectively combated the Confederate Lost Cause in recent years? Gallagher does not consider that perhaps Americans are drawn to the story of black soldiers and to the cause of racial equity because this narrative is *the nation’s* lost cause. When we watch the film, we know that the respect and equality that these men strove to achieve would be a long time coming and that it was not just the 54th’s assault on Fort Wagner that was a failure. Such a narrative is attractive in precisely the same ways that the Confederate tradition is appealing: because these men were so close, and yet they failed.

Gallagher concludes that while the Emancipation Cause has emerged as the dominant interpretive narrative since 1989 and Reconciliation themes have appeared consistently, Civil War films “fail almost completely to convey any sense of what the Union Cause meant to millions of northern citizens” (92). He suggests that this absence is due in part to the difficulty of conveying nationalism in a compelling way in film, and in part to more negative views of

the federal government and the U.S. army in the post-Vietnam years (123). The result has been increasingly unfavorable depictions of northern soldiers and a “triumph for the Lost Cause” as northerners’ nationalism has been erased from popular understandings of the motivations for war (133). Gallagher believes that this “dismissal of the Union cause poses serious problems” because most Americans are thus led to believe that northern soldiers did not care about the survival of the nation; such a belief promotes a “flawed conception of the North’s Civil War” (92). This is an important point, surely, but the stakes beyond this are unclear. David Blight and others have argued that the erasure of emancipation from Civil War narratives in favor of reconciliation bolstered widespread racial discrimination in American culture; what then might the loss of nationalism mean? In an increasingly globalized United States, citizens’ emotional ties to the country may be weakening, and this could result in seismic changes in politics and culture. Gallagher could have made a more incisive point here about the causes and effects of the erasure of nationalism in Civil War film and American society.

While Gallagher’s studies of film are engaging and his arguments in these first three chapters are intriguing, it is the fourth chapter of *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten* that breaks new ground. Most previous studies of Civil War art have focused on illustrations, photographs, and paintings produced between 1861 and 1900; while Gallagher spends some time discussing several of these early works (like *The Burial of Latané* (1864) and *The Last Meeting of Lee and Jackson* (1869)) his real interest lies in the recent paintings produced by Mort Künstler, Don Troiani, and Dale Gallon. In order to determine the dominant themes in popular artworks, he has built a database of 2,750 advertisements published between 1962 and 2006 in three Civil War magazines. This sample provides persuasive evidence for Gallagher’s argument that art-buying Civil War enthusiasts “overwhelmingly prefer Confederate leaders and themes” (137). A useful chart reveals not only this Confederate bias but also a corresponding surge in production and demand for Civil War art in the 1990s, just as the Lost Cause narrative in film was in decline (138). Gallagher’s suggestion, that as film and television began to deemphasize Confederate images and storylines, Lost Cause enthusiasts turned to the art market in order to consume such images privately, is convincing. Another captivating argument surfaces in this chapter: recent film and television have influenced artists, shaping their choice of subject matter. For example, Gallagher notes that after the release of *Gettysburg*, Ken Burns’ *Civil War*, and *Gods and Generals*, artistic depictions of Gettysburg increased, as did

representations of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. Film and television have also influenced artists' renderings of historical figures; in one startling painting, Robert E. Lee looks much more like Martin Sheen (who played him in *Gettysburg*) than the man himself. The arguments in this last chapter, rooted in a large and novel source base, reveal important connections between different genres of popular art and are the most edifying of the book.

Overall, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten* contains many significant arguments and several new ideas of use to scholars of Civil War culture and memory; Gallagher's point that Civil War artists influence one another is an especially valuable contribution. This book illuminates the ways that film and art both depict and erase the motivations for and reactions to America's most convulsive national event.

Megan Kate Nelson is assistant professor of History at California State University, Fullerton. She is currently working on her second book, Flesh and Stone: Ruins and the Civil War.