

Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914

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Review

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William A. Blair *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914*. University of North Carolina Press,

Continual Strife and Public Memory

Commemorations in the aftermath of the War

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many in the Gulf Coast region worried that flood waters would raise the water table and push airtight coffins to the earth's surface, sending them floating down city streets to mingle with the living. News from Biloxi reported that over fifty coffins had in fact been unearthed, and many of these lay scattered across the sands of local beaches. But in the cemeteries of New Orleans, called Cities of the Dead for the rows of stone mausoleums that look like small villages, wandering coffins were less of a problem than residents had feared. These cemeteries were built aboveground with floods in mind, and their design protected the residents of New Orleans from rubbing up against the bones of the dead. In his new book, also called **Cities of the Dead**, William Blair, a professor of history at Pennsylvania State University, writes about the half-century after the Civil War when Americans willfully poured by the thousands into cemeteries to commune with dead veterans, to decorate their graves, and to channel their symbolism for contemporary political purposes. It is this last concern that drives Blair's narrative of Memorial Days, Emancipation Days, and other public commemorations, particularly in Virginia, the capital of the former Confederacy, but in other parts of the South as well.

Focusing on the political meanings of these celebrations, Blair significantly revises earlier works by Paul Buck and others, which argued that public commemorations of the Civil War paved the way for national reconciliation. He argues instead that conflict rather than consensus was the impulse behind remembrance, especially during the Reconstruction era. **Cities of the Dead** ranks Blair among a growing group of scholars studying memory and the Civil War,

including David Blight, Fitzhugh Brundage, and Alice Fahs. Rather than the construction of memory itself, Blair answers sharp questions about the form and content of Civil War commemorations, such as who organized and participated in particular celebrations? What was their affiliation? Who delivered orations and what was their purpose? And how did commemorations change over time? In doing so, he continues to deepen our understanding of the relation between politics and memory.

Not counting an important first chapter outlining the origin and development of public rituals in the antebellum era, which provides much needed context for understanding public commemorations of the Civil War from Appomattox forward, Blair tracks the changing meanings of Memorial and Emancipation Days during three periods. The first broadly encompasses the Reconstruction era; the second constitutes what Blair calls an era of mixed feelings, a period in limbo that bridges the end of Reconstruction and the turn of the century; and the third takes us from wars of expansion in the 1890s to the dawn of World War I. The narrative arching over this half century stitches together several important histories, including processes of reconciliation, the evolution of African American politics, women's participation in public rituals, and the changing course of partisan politics.

For Blair, each period had distinct characteristics, and explaining the shifting historical contexts underlying various commemorative moments is no small accomplishment. The years immediately following the war, he argues, presented a hypercharged environment in which all sides eyed each other warily and with great scrutiny as they planned the first celebrations of freedom and remembrance. Zealous expressions of joy on the part of African Americans, or public displays that smacked too much of honoring the southern cause, such as waving a Confederate flag or donning a military uniform, could spur hostility and violence. Played out within the context of the Reconstruction Acts and new constitutional amendments—which officially abolished slavery, stripped former Confederate states of their governments, imposed federal military control throughout the South, and granted blacks suffrage—public commemorations of the war, Blair tells us, increasingly became an overt part of the political process. They functioned much as political conventions where like-minded people, whoever they were, promoted their civil rights, applauded loyal soldiers who protected the Union, or rallied against the purported chokehold of Radical Republican government (to the extent that federal officers would permit it). During these tense times, Blair argues, reconciliation sentiment existed, but it

was a one-way street, with the defeated accepting the terms of the victorious.

Beginning just before the end of Reconstruction, during Blair's era of mixed feelings, the federal government softened its hand on public commemorations. In the years just after the war, ex-Confederates tread gently so as to not stumble upon the trip cord of government retaliation—generally avoiding marching in uniform, with weapons, or in organized regiments—but by the late 1870s, they filled the streets on Confederate Memorial Days in an assertive celebration of the heroes of the war. As elections placed many Republicans in office in the South, fears subsided that Confederates would rebel again, which ironically gave southerners the wiggle room necessary to rearticulate messages of home rule and redemption. Blair characterizes this second period as a time when expressions of reconciliation blossomed, even though many—black and white, northerner and southerner alike—had mixed sentiments about what he broadly calls the nation. He cites episodes like ex-Confederates attending the burial of a U.S. officer, or black men in Virginia hoping to march in a parade celebrating the unveiling of a statue of Stonewall Jackson, as evidence of a widespread desire to clasp hands across what had been a bloody chasm. But according to Blair, equally telling were the 1885 inauguration of Grover Cleveland, the first Democratic President since before the Civil War, and the increasingly violent backlash against African American enfranchisement, both of which signaled for many blacks the need to reevaluate their position in the United States. Era of mixed feelings, indeed.

Lastly, in the wake of imperial ventures in the Philippines and in Cuba, and leading to the outbreak of war in Europe, north and south finalized their reconciliation. Following Blair, Memorial Days in the early 1900s might have been unrecognizable to ex-soldiers in the years immediately following the Civil War. First, Memorial Day by the 1910s commemorated veterans of other wars as well. Second, by the early-twentieth century, Blair argues that the style of campaigns had changed, with public processions no longer playing the role in electoral politics that they had in early celebrations of Emancipation and Memorial Days. Politicians still made appearances, he writes, but they shied away in their orations from harping on sectional issues, pronouncing instead what he calls the common attributes of all Americans, or at least all whites. Third, many Americans of a new generation who did not live through the Civil War had little interest in perpetuating its divisiveness. In a wonderful last chapter, Blair suggests that the establishment in 1914 of a Confederate section in Arlington National Cemetery was the pinnacle of this final period of reconciliation. Reversing nearly half a century of federal neglect, Congress had

recently appropriated funds for the upkeep of Confederate graves, and according to Blair these proceedings were a benchmark on the road to reunion. What better way of reconciling differences than for the dead to become the common care of the living?

Perhaps the greatest strength of **Cities of the Dead** is that it keeps multiple histories in dynamic tension throughout. Blair juggles many groups and themes at once, making for a somewhat hectic narrative, but what he loses in smoothness he gains back in depth and complexity. Besides, any work that approaches half a century of public commemorations from the perspectives of women and men, blacks and whites, northerners and southerners, and Republicans and Democrats is bound to have a few rough edges. To take Emancipation Days as an example, Blair pays close attention to their changing meaning and nuances, such as their different dates and forms from one community to the next in Virginia, South Carolina, and Louisiana. He shows that Reconstruction-era celebrations displayed the sense of hope many blacks had as they looked forward to lives of freedom and political inclusion. As Blair writes, it was a heady moment for many African Americans. To black soldiers in the Union Army, these occasions reinforced their manhood by calling attention to the citizenship they had earned through service to their country. They marched through the streets in fully formed battalions, and with weapons resting on their shoulders, a sight that gave many ex-Confederate observers a deep sense of anxiety. As winds changed following the revolt against black rights, so did the tenor of Emancipation Days. Feeling abandoned by the Republican Party, some blacks lent an ear to third-party candidates and even Democrats, but sensing that none of these parties would represent them, orators at Emancipation Days through the end of the nineteenth century delivered what Blair describes as a persistent call to become self-reliant. By the fiftieth anniversary of emancipation, which received the endorsement of Congress and Woodrow Wilson, he tells us that many blacks experienced a sense of disenchantment, feeling that white leaders in tandem with black accommodationists had co-opted the holiday for their own political ends.

Similarly, Blair shows how the meaning of Confederate Memorial Days changed for women. Following the work of Drew Faust, he argues that women in the south experienced an expanded role in the public sphere during Reconstruction. While the public lives of former Confederate soldiers fell under federal surveillance, women organized the decoration of Confederate graves and other commemorations. Ladies memorial associations determined the content of

ceremonies, they organized men to collect and rebury the dead, and they raised funds to decorate graves. Though many critics viewed their activities as proof that Confederate men hid behind women's skirts, leaving it to the fairer sex to preserve sectional bitterness, others heaped praise on southern women for the work they did to achieve reconciliation by denying politicized marches, speeches, or other behavior that broke the solemn mood of the day. As southern men returned to power during the era of mixed feelings and beyond, Blair argues that many southern women returned to life in the shadows of public politics, which according to Faust and others was, paradoxically, exactly where some aimed to be.

This great virtue of Blair's work also points to one of its shortcomings. Despite his effort to explain Emancipation and Memorial Days from multiple perspectives, he is unable to do so in equal measure, or with equally successful results. His work on black women's participation in Reconstruction-era commemorations, for example, is especially thin. This is partially a problem inherent in what kinds of sources are available, and even more importantly, what these sources do and do not tell us. Blair analyzes a few articles in the local press of Richmond, Virginia, and Greensboro, North Carolina, which lead him to conclude that African American women had a political consciousness of their own, but for the most part he relies on secondary work by scholars such as Elsa Barkley Brown, Glenda Gilmore, and Julie Saville in order to craft his argument. Readers may also wonder about the temporal imbalance of **Cities of the Dead**, since the first half of the book (besides the first chapter) covers only one decade, while the second half carries the weight of almost four. The obvious consequence is that Blair pays the Reconstruction era far greater attention than he is able to give the era of mixed feelings, or the period of final reconciliation. These are small points though, which do not take away from **Cities of the Dead's** standing as an important contribution to the growing field of studies that prove beyond doubt that Civil War commemorations from 1865 forward were, and are, political in nature. Blair's genius lies in his carefully reasoned explanations of *how* and *why* these celebrations carried political meaning in particular historical moments.

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