

The Loyal West: Civil War And Reunion In Middle America

Matthew Stanley

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

Recommended Citation

Stanley, Matthew (2017) "The Loyal West: Civil War And Reunion In Middle America," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.4.05

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss4/22>

Interview

THE LOYAL WEST: CIVIL WAR AND REUNION IN MIDDLE AMERICA

Stanley, Matthew

Fall 2017

Interview with Matthew Stanley, author of *The Loyal West: Civil War and Reunion in Middle America* Interviewed by Tom Barber

CWBR: Today the Civil War Book Review is pleased to speak with Matthew E. Stanley, assistant professor of history at Albany State University in Albany, Georgia. Today we are here to talk with him about his new book, *The Loyal West: Civil War and Reunion in Middle America*. Professor Stanley, thank you for joining us today.

Matthew Stanley (MS): Thanks for having me Tom.

CWBR: So, your book looks at what we think of today as the mid-west by examining the cultural and intellectual significance of place, race, and memory.

So, we'll begin with place. Where was the middle west geographically? And how did it become a place in the American imagination before the Civil War?

MS: Yeah, so the book is talking about the sense of region literally and how regions become sections. So, when I think of regions, I'm talking about a sense of common culture based on geography, kinship, commercial ties--things of that nature. What becomes the Midwest, which is a term that actually isn't in popular usage until the early twentieth century, begins as a the middle north-west first, as the west generally--but when I talk about the middle west, what I'm really talking, and I focus in on in my book, are Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and what becomes the Midwest. These regional designations, are pretty fluid and pretty fast and loose. So, in thinking about the transformation from region into section throughout most of the book.

CWBR: How did these folks living in the Midwest, or the middle west, before the Civil War--how did they see themselves? How did their place geographically, affect their identity before war breaks out?

MS: Well the people I'm writing about primarily in southern Ohio, southern Indiana, and southern Illinois and some extent Kentucky, across the Ohio river, would not have called themselves Northerners, which had a distinct, most of the time, had distinct political implication. They certainly wouldn't have thought of themselves as Yankees, which had a specific political and cultural meaning as well. They often thought of themselves as westerners. To be a westerner meant to some degree, whether through popular sovereignty or compromise measures, some degree of compatibility between slavery and freedom. And it was, like I said, it was a term that was used in very fast and loose ways. So, Chicagoans referred to themselves as westerners. So, it encapsulated a region that spanned from the Great Lakes, and probably the epicenter, being the Ohio River Valley and would go into the border South and even south of that sometimes, Arkansas--Mississippians even would refer to themselves as westerners. But this was a term that was used, in addition to and was often synonymous with the idea border people or central people, they would call themselves the middle states. Meaning that there was a degree of them thinking of themselves as being a section or a region of the country that was not the North, not the South, but the idea of them of having their own political interests in the West, and as we know those west--middle west political interests began to shift rapidly once the Civil War began to align with those of the North and the Northeast.

CWBR: Even though they didn't consider themselves Northern or Yankee or even Southern, they did still identify with institution of slavery. Can you explain how that works, if they're thinking of themselves culturally as different than both the regions that we come to think of the United States before the Civil War? How did they reconcile this notion of being western and also accepting slavery?

MS: Right, when I talk about upland southerners, or butternuts, being vassals of Southern culture, I don't want to overstate that. They do live in a free region. The states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois do have racial exclusion laws on the books prior to the Civil War. They retain southern culture and southern politics in some ways, and southern racial sensibilities--that is to say white people who moved north of the Ohio River, but they were not southerners, nor were their political predilections immutable. So, in the lower middle west, conceptions of whiteness, which were formed by distinct experiences of

settler/colonialism and racial exclusion, they were shaped discrete conditions of land and labor.

This is to say that most people in the antebellum lower middle west had a vested interest in maintaining the South's racial hierarchy. They didn't want slaves, or black people, to move north of the Ohio River. So, there was a cross-class fear for instance that the introduction of African American people into the lower middle west would what they called--this is the term they would use-- "degrade white labor" and denigrate social and cultural conditions of the region so white identities as not slaves or not black were shaped less by slave state style racial domination and more by free state style racial aversion. So, for elites that meant that they could use racism to facilitate political hegemony and control labor and for non-elites that meant that they didn't have to compete with black labor for wages or for housing or for land and space.

CWBR: Now you would think, and your book does a great job about thinking about irony, that this sort of--even if it is not a complete commitment to slavery--that there might be a great deal of sympathy throughout the middle west region before the war for secession, but that isn't what happened. When the South begins to seriously consider leaving the United States, and confronting the problems of the 1850s with expansion and slavery, what happens to the middle west--that your book focuses--why don't they go toward or embrace secession?

MS: Yeah, because the old idea of western identity is deeply rooted in nationalism. It is also rooted in national expansion, but the secessionist impulse--the idea of challenging the status quo is the kind of thing they are rejecting. It is seen as immoderate, it is seen as just as immoderate as abolitionism, so when they think of themselves as being in the middle, they are not talking about just being westerners as opposed to easterners and southerners or northerners or southerners. They're also thinking about themselves as being within the middle of the west, so they're identifying as the median within the national median, so even among westerners you have this more reform minded, Whiggish, Republican party oriented Great Lakes part of the Midwest, and then through the South you have small or slave holding--in fact as the more South you get more of the plantation complex, so they see themselves as caught between two fires is the phrase one southern Indiana resident uses. That is true not only the West being between the North and the South but also as the lower Midwest or the border between the great lakes and the plantation South.

CWBR: So why then do they, this nationalism you talk about before the war becomes Unionism why does the region--if they are stuck between two fires--what makes unionism and national loyalty more important than perhaps the degradation of white labor. Rephrased, why do they embrace unionism instead of secession?

MS: To be clear, there are on the margins, secession being discussed by some hardcore copperheads of the region we're talking, who talk about breaking away and forming the state of Jacksonia--it's not ever a serious endeavor. Many of them support union for the same reason other northerners did. It is part of the regional imagination and when you think of William Henry Harrison, Henry Clay, and Tippecanoe and things that influence the regional mythology they are rooted in unionism and nationalism, even slave holders to the south of the lower mid-west remained loyal to the union too for the same reason, which is because they thought slavery and the status quo would be best preserved within the Union, rather than risking a war and possible chaos or an overturning of the social and economic system. They really just wanted compromise on the whole and that war as the expression goes in the Midwest is a revolution--tricky things happen during war, so in some ways the last part of the free states to get behind the Union cause, but when they did they did so with great vigor.

CWBR: So, they see Unionism as a way to maintain the status quo, whether that is in terms of politics or labor practices. So that might work well for the first few years of the war but then we come to emancipation and the North and Lincoln emancipating slaves and then integrating them into the U.S. Army, how does this region that wants to keep the status quo, that joined the war in order to keep antebellum America alive and keep those boundaries in place, how do they react to emancipation and how does this start to begin to change how they see themselves and they place they occupy geographically?

MS: So the perceptions of the South begin to change among Union soldiers very quickly and that accelerates throughout 1862 and 1863. So, you have, in writing about the South, what I call the conservative unionist vision of the South which is to say they begin to exoticize and confederatize the South and talk about how it is a place where poor white people are degraded and it is a spoiled landscape and they begin to think about it in these stark free labor/slave labor terms. And even for Democrats perpetuating and reinforcing the old free labor Republican party rhetoric of the 1850s which is that slave society just isn't as good as ours. So, you have an acceptance, but it is slow to grow. There are many

lower middle western soldiers who never get right with emancipation and I would say the majority come to tolerate it--some embrace it, some reject it altogether--it is not a clean union-to-emancipation narrative among lower middle western soldiers--it is very messy. In the end, there are not as many as wholesale desertions as are threatened--there are a few, but they are the minority. Most lower middle western soldiers come to see emancipation and black enlistment as practical military measures they can accept so long as their communities stay lily white so that is another problem on the homefront, but it is accepted rather than enthusiastically endorsed by most middle lower western soldiers. And that comes to have implications in the post war period as they are remembering the war, emancipation really doesn't factor into that narrative, sometimes at all and certainly there were these secondary things to the political restoration of the union.

CWBR: Right, so it is after--as the war is taking and in this post war period that a notion of a loyal west takes place. How did this happen and who did it? Who helped create this notion of a loyal west in this post war period?

MS: Formally it begins with the publication of Barber and Howe's *The Loyal West in the time of Rebellion* in 1865--a lot of Grand Army of the Republic and union veterans association leaders use some sort of idea of the term after the war, but informally it begins, I would argue, with Union soldiers in the South in Kentucky, in Missouri, and Tennessee who make distinctions and say this idea of a unified antebellum west, which may have worked at one time with regard to political culture even though the unification of the west was much exaggerated and tended to be employed only when it was expedient, but they are beginning to distinguish between not only the west--between loyal and disloyal elements--that thinking of themselves as loyal westerns allows them to keep that regional identity and that competition with and sometimes antipathy toward the East and the Northeast not only the region, but also the union armies, but it also allows them to embrace the term loyal, which suggests an integration into the nation-state and to separate from them disloyal west of the slave holding south and even Kentucky, which never secedes but many lower middle western soldiers come to view as a hostile and secessionist and treasonous place.

CWBR: Right, so you brought up the idea of how veterans especially helped create this notion of a loyal west and helped reconfigured political culture. Can you talk about how they do this versus elites who wrote books about this. What was the creation of the loyal west at the ground level, so here I'm talking about

the Grand Army of the Republic and other veterans' associations. How did they fold loyalty to the union and this vision of white labor together at the ground level?

MS: First let me clarify that the loyal west narrative is the idea that union soldiers from the West were not only merely undefeated in battle or that they were superior soldiers to eastern union soldiers but that they also had superior political military leaders--even though they fought a harder more destructive war in some ways against the Confederacy than the Army of the Potomac--that they didn't necessarily rely on emancipation or black soldiers in order to do this, which is a fiction in itself. But it was sort of this idea of anti-confederate, anti-black, and vaguely anti-northeastern or anti-eastern at the same time and this idea or some basic tenants of this were perpetuated through reunions. I looked at newspaper sources for veterans' reunions, personal documents for veterans of reunion and a lot--probably the motherlode--was veterans' organization meetings. For instance in 1874 in Milwaukee at the Society of the Army of the Tennessee reunion John Pope, an Illinoisan, says "When the war was over we found that the President of the United States is a western man, the Vice President was a western man, the Speaker of the House a western man, the secretary of treasury a western man, Secretary of War, Secretary of the Interior, Postmaster General, Attorney General and he just goes on down the line and talks about the power of the government in its both civil and military departments had passed into the hands of western men. So he is playing fast and loose with the idea of western, but this encapsulates, as well as any quote, the idea of the loyal west--that the war had been--that they had done the bulk of the fighting--that the Army of the Potomac had only traveled 100 miles effectively between the D.C.-Richmond corridor. Meanwhile the western armies had gone from the southern tip of Illinois through Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia, up through the Carolinas, and ended the war somewhere in North Carolina. So the idea that, I think begins during the war, but you also see in the grand review of the armies at the end of the war in which the ideas about the distinctions between western and eastern soldiers play out not only in terms of campaign record but also sartorially. You have the rugged, scruffy, hard-worn looking western soldiers versus the more stately, prim and proper eastern soldiers and there is a lot of commentary on that as well.

CWBR: Now commemoration, and the larger idea of memory, also plays in this post-war period. How did creating monuments to these western figures help--whether it was veterans or politicians, and these private associations of

soldiers, how did the creation of monuments help them rewrite history? The actual person, Grant was for emancipation and embraced the major tenants of Republicanism, but as you mention throughout the book it seems that when these ceremonies take place, when middle westerners, especially in the lower middle west, begin to commemorate these war heroes they do so by excluding and excising some of their political sentiment. Can you talk a little bit about that?

MS: They remember the republican leadership of the war the way people tend to remember things in terms of heritage. It is not about representing the multi-dimensional reality of the figure or the event--it is about picking what you need in that political moment and so for middle western, lower middle westerners especially, that normally means focusing on region and the triumphs of maybe the state or the west itself, but also as you said excising emancipation and emancipationist memory from the monument or the reunion or whatever it might be. That is not to say there is a total absence of emancipationist memory in the lower middle west. I can think of several striking examples. For instance, the Soldiers' and Sailors' monument in Indianapolis, the Lovejoy memorial in Alton, Illinois but that normally meant an emphasis, a distinct emphasis on political restoration and oftentimes a reminder where these leaders such as Grant, Sherman, and Lincoln came from.

CWBR: As you said in the book emancipation, as you said in the book proved to be a "commemorative void." Even though there are commemorations, public ceremonies that remember emancipation and its importance, you also point out too in the book it is not just the creation of the loyal west that you talk about it is also the disintegration of this loyal west. Can you explain how these monuments and commemoration anticipate and perpetuate national reconciliation after the war?

MS: This is a good question because the way I came this project was actually through an article in Century magazine published in 1888 by a New York veteran named George Kilmer. It was titled The Blue-Gray Reunions Up to This Point or something to that affect and it was a list of all the major Blue-Gray reunions that had taken place up to 1888. In looking at that list, I noticed Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Maryland, Luray, Virginia, Mexico, Missouri, Owensboro, Kentucky, Evansville, Indiana, Cincinnati, Ohio, Louisville, Kentucky, and there was a striking correlation between Blue-Gray Reunions and physical geography of being along the border between North and South. There was, and this is obvious--it would be intuitive for these reunions to start to

happen in the geographic middle between north and south--that makes sense--but it also said something about the politics and the culture, I argue, of western or border identity. And I don't focus so much on the Blue-Gray reunion in the east, but the earliest Blue-Gray, and certainly the earliest major ones, happen in the Ohio River Valley. I'm thinking especially of Evansville's 1887 reunion--this was a major event. The Blue-Gray reconcilers or--whether they are reconciling or reuniting we can debate that at a different date--but they do see themselves as being forerunners of a national reunion culture. They see themselves as doing something new as anticipating a wave of Blue-Gray reunions. There is a major Blue-Gray reunion in Evansville in 1887, there is an even bigger one in 1899 in the middle of the celebration of American empire into Latin American and the Pacific, but this gives way and it becomes the forerunner for a larger, more national Blue-Gray reunion culture, especially one centers on the Spanish-American war and culminates at the 1913 Gettysburg reunion. And I argue that the loyal west narrative becomes overcome and forgotten by creating or helping to create a larger Blue-Gray reconciliation narrative. By the beginning of the twentieth century you don't really hear much about the loyal west anymore, you hear a lot about Blue-Gray reconciliation, but the idea of a regional specific western, border, or middle state, reunion culture begins to die out.

CWBR: Also, too I would imagine the notion of loyalty automatically becomes synonymous with treason--you have to forget loyalty to create a national reunion because secession was about treason, which I thought was a great insight from your book.

Finally, how does an understanding of the loyal west's rise and fall inform today's political discussions and debates, or does it?

MS: I think there is a lot to take away in terms of contemporary implications in the realms of racial identity and class and politics. So, you have the debates over Confederate removals stir people in Louisville and Lexington, which of course one of the many ironies of the story was not even a Confederate state. And as evidenced by last year's presidential election, we continue to see patterns of how elites create and wield racist discourses for political and material gain, how racism feeds off of both perceived and real cultural marginalization and economic insecurity. As well as how racialized populism and grievance politics of white, petty-bourgeois, "forgotten" Americans in the Midwest still holds sway, so the idea that people being written out of a narrative or being forgotten,

especially white grievance politics, that have sort of always existed in American politics, but have been recharged lately through the presidency of Trump as well as led to the election of Trump. You see those kinds of patterns in the story of the loyal west as well.

CWBR: Professor Stanley, I appreciate you taking the time to sit and discuss your most recent work *The Loyal West: Civil War and Reunion in Middle America*.

MS: Thanks Tom, thanks for having me.