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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: THROUGH THE HEART OF DIXIE: SHERMAN'S MARCH AND AMERICAN MEMORY

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Interview with Anne Sarah Rubin, Associate Professor of History at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Interviewed by Zach Isenhower

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Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is excited to speak with Anne Sarah Rubin, associate professor of history at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. Professor Rubin previously authored, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861-1868*. Today we get to discuss her most recent book, *Through the Heart of Dixie: Sherman's March and American Memory*. Professor Rubin, thank you for joining us today. **Anne Sarah Rubin (ASR):** Thank you very much for having me.

CWBR: So just to start we always like to hear, what lead you to this project?

ASR: I decided to write about Sherman's march and the place of Sherman's march in American culture a long time actually before I started the book. It was a kind of confluences of things that happened during graduate school, things that I read and things that I saw. I had read Charles Royster's *The Destructive War*, which is a fascinating dual biography of Sherman and Stonewall Jackson and it looks in the way of how Americans became more comfortable with this kind of destruction and devastation. All around that same time was the first time I saw the Ross McElwee movie *Sherman's March* where he, in the early 1980's goes down South and he was planning to write a documentary about the legacy of Sherman's March. He wound up having all these romantic problems, so what the movie really becomes is him trying to figure out why he can't have a girlfriend

and Sherman's March is a metaphor. I thought that was really interesting and unusual. Also, right around that time I saw references in a documentary then read James Reston's book *Sherman's March in Vietnam*, where Reston tries to make a connection between Sherman's march and the destructiveness and devastation that Americans wreaked in Vietnam. Somehow it all kind of came together. There was something special about Sherman's march that made it unlike other Civil War campaigns and that gave it a sort of greater cultural power than other campaigns and events had, so that's why I decided to start exploring it.

CWBR: It's interesting that what draws you in is the cultural power of the march and we see that even in the name, because it's "Sherman's March to the Sea" but we really don't have a good name for it. It seems like we ought to at least add "Sherman's March to the Sea, and Back," right?

ASR: Right, exactly and what happens, what I think is really interesting and what I was not very aware of in the beginning was how important the Carolinas campaign actually is. First of all, Sherman thought that Carolinas campaign was more important and I think at one point he refers to the march to the sea to a mere change of base. It's the Carolinas campaign that is in fact even more devastating and destruction than the Georgia portion of the march. There's a real sense of anger and vengeance in South Carolina in the part of the men and Sherman is very disingenuous about this in his memoir he writes, "Well somehow the men got the idea that South Carolina was the cause of all their troubles and the cause of this war. They wanted to be harder on South Carolina and I felt like I couldn't restrain them less they sort of loose their fighting edge and their vigor." He lets them loose on South Carolina and there is much more destruction of personal property of houses as opposed to outbuildings. I'm not minimizing what happens in Georgia only saying that it's actually worse than South Carolina and yet it's much less well known. Then in North Carolina the men are supposed to put the gloves back on, because of Unionism in North Carolina because of the unionist population there. They don't quite do it to the degree I think that Sherman would have wanted them to do. That's why the book in its entirety is about Sherman's march and I felt really strongly about how it had to be more than just the Georgia piece.

CWBR: Why is it you think that Georgia--and it seems like it happened fairly quickly by the early twentieth century Georgia and Atlanta specifically kind of manages to claim the effects of that march almost all to itself and it seems like especially the South Carolina story is sort of lost outside of South Carolina.

Why do you think that happened so quickly?

ASR: It is really a curious thing and I think it happened for a couple of reasons. I think there is sort of narrative tidiness to the Georgia piece of it that it's the march to the sea. It's got this kind of inherent drama or destination, you're going to the sea. I think that's why, for example, it holds more cultural power, meaning, and people remember its violence more than the Shenandoah Valley Campaign or something like that in terms of how it blocks everything out. Also, a lot of it actually is the impact of *Gone with the Wind*, so that's a little later than what you're saying. It's the 1930's, 1936 is the novel and the movie is 1939. *Gone with the Wind* just exerts so much influence and defined Sherman's march for generations of Americans. One of the things that's pretty important to understand about *Gone with the Wind* is that Margaret Mitchell had grown up hearing stories about Sherman's march. It had happened to her grandparents and she also did a lot of research. She's very very careful in the book to be as scrupulously accurate as she can about all the military maneuvers. She writes in a letter at one point saying, "I don't want anybody coming to me and saying that I got it wrong." True confession time, I had seen *Gone With the Wind* for the first time in the 8th grade history class, and I always like to add unironically. I actually grew up in the North too, this was right outside New York City. Then I had read the book, which I was about thirteen at the time and it was the longest book I had ever read, I was so enamored by the romance and all the reasons *Gone with the Wind* is a great novel and movie. Then when I became a historian and a southern historian then I started to realize how much was problematic about *Gone with the Wind*--the way it treats race and reconstruction. I moved away from it for a while but when I started looking at it again for this book, I sat down and reread the novel. For the first night I thought I'd just skim it and wound up literally staying up until two in the morning reading it. I was sort of sucked back into it again. Now I see that *Gone with the Wind* is this really powerful document. If you want an illustration of what white southerners thought about the Civil War and reconstruction in the 1920's and 30's read *Gone with the Wind*. It's straight out the Dunning School. For all of those reasons I think *Gone with the Wind* has a huge impact.

CWBR: Do you think the timing of *Gone with the Wind* is also sort of critical? It emerges right about the same time that a lot of these actual Union veterans of the march, the "bummers," a lot of them are in their later years or gone. Do you think that the timing was right for, even in the North, a narrative that suggested the cause may have been just, but even [northerners] can admit or

believe that Sherman was perhaps a little bit too much?

ASR: I think that's interesting. I haven't really thought about that but you're exactly right. You know it comes out, the movie, right around the 75th anniversary of the march. There's a huge fanfare about it. They do this three day premiere with people dressed up in costumes and hoop skirts. In one of these crazy you-can't-make-it-up historical coincidences, Martin Luther King as a child actually sings in a choir that performs at the *Gone with the Wind* premiere. What are the chances? So anyway I do think there is a lot of that, that there's not ever a good kind of northern counter-narrative of Sherman's march. Even the northern novels don't really--Yeah that's right there's not really a northern defense of the march in that period. Veterans themselves in the 1870's, 80's, and 90's they talk about the march in very heroic terms that they see it as winning the war and they minimize the degree of destruction, but you don't really see that coming out afterwards. The condemnations of *Gone with the Wind* are not about the way it portrays Sherman it's about the way it portrays African Americans and the way it portrays Reconstruction, as the carnival of corruption. So you're right that's a great insight. I should have put that in the book.

CWBR: Going off of your point there about Reconstruction it does seem that this march is really heavily mythologized very quickly and even though it has a tidy narrative as you say you also write that it sort of is missing the central cast of characters and missing the epic battles that the other mythologized events in the Civil War like Pickett's Charge, and there are a number of reasons why it occupies such a huge space. I was hoping you could expand on that a little bit.

ASR: There's very few actual battles along Sherman's march and from the Union side in particular they take very few casualties over the course of the march. Very few people died. That's one of the reasons that Union soldiers remember the march fondly. It doesn't have the kind of heroic grandeur such as Pickett's Charge or Cold Harbor or anything like that. It is the military movement that is about civilians, I think in a way that fewer or any other campaigns are described that way. Historians know about all of these campaigns against civilians and places on the border or as I mention the Shenandoah Valley, but the general public doesn't. So what happens is that Sherman's march becomes the scapegoat for all the ills visited on civilians, and all the devastation wrought on the South. Then I think there's a little bit of conflation too of any destruction and devastation is going to be blamed on Sherman. These legends, Oh Sherman burned my family's house in Alabama, well no, because he wasn't there. I've had people

come up to me giving talks and someone how came up to me recently saying "Oh we have a chair with scorch marks on the back and the scorch marks are from Sherman," and it could be from the march because this person mentioned where the chair had been and that in fact was in South Carolina on the route of the march so that could be true. But I think there's a lot of that kind of legend that grows up around it.

CWBR: Well even in just the way the march is described I thought it was interesting when it comes down to the tactics. In the [popular] narrative, it always comes down in a swath, but it wasn't actually in a swath right?

ASR: The phrase that I always use is, we think of it as this 50-mile wide lawn mower stripe but it's not. It's more like a 50-mile row of stitches in that there are a lot of places that aren't touched on Sherman's march. One of the things I explore in the book are that there are all these different stories and legends that grow up, about the reasons why this house was spared or that house was spared. It occurred to that the reason there are so many stories about homes being spared for different reasons was in fact so many homes were spared. You can't make this argument that Sherman's march cut this 50-mile wide swath and at the same time have tourism brochures and what-not praising all the antebellum homes that are still standing. It becomes this interesting way for stories about the march to come up that [people say] "this house was spared because we put up Masonic apron on the door or that house was spared because there were pretty girls there, or we saved the family silver by hiding it somewhere clever, or the jewelry got stuck in the baby's diaper and that's why we still have the jewelry." These ways of outwitting the Yankees become really prevalent, common stories.

CWBR: It seems that compares to a lot of other Civil War memory--of course women have played a huge role in shaping a lot of those memories with the Daughters of the Confederacy and what-not--but it seems women play an even more essential role when it comes to Sherman's march because they're actually the actors, right?

ASR: In most cases women were the ones that confronted the Sherman soldiers when they came onto their farms or plantations. Partly this was because most able-bodied men were away, and those able-bodied men who weren't away often hid when they knew Sherman was coming. They figured the women would be largely protected by their gender. One of the big misconceptions we have today about Sherman's march is that we talk about it in the context of "total war,"

whatever "total war" means, and to us it means a war on civilians that involves the death of civilians. It's total war in the WWII or the Vietnam or Gulf War sense where there's actual killing of civilians, and that just doesn't happen along Sherman's march. They're not hauling civilians out and shooting them. They're not using sexual violence as a weapon the way that we've seen in ethnic cleansing and things like that. I don't want to minimize the impact the march had on civilians and it was terrifying for them, but it was a war against civilian property not against civilian persons.

CWBR: Then why do you think that narrative seems to be so entrenched? It seems pretty evident that even if one could broadly define Sherman's war against property as still some kind of form of terror tactics, he's not the first even in the Civil War to do that.

ASR: I think it's the triumph actually of a lot of the Lost Cause in ascribing this Sherman and it's the triumph of something like *Gone With the Wind* where that's the narrative that's put forward. Sherman I think, people always ask if Sherman was a war criminal and the answer to that I would say is no. I think Sherman is someone who knew very well the laws of war and I would say that he knew where the line was and he pushed right up against that line, but didn't step over the line of what was permissible under the laws of war at the time. The only cases were where I think he might have are where in retaliation for Confederate actions he, in one case a Union soldier steps on a minefield in Georgia and has his legs blown off and Sherman calls up a bunch of prisoners of war and has them walk across the minefield. They actually survived all that. Then there are some cases in South Carolina and North Carolina where some groups of Union foragers were killed and in retaliation Sherman ordered some Confederate prisoners killed. That I think is more morally problematic than the kind of destruction and destroying of supplies that the march engaged in.

CWBR: It's sort of ironic that one of the most morally problematic events of the whole march is actually afflicted on freed slaves when that is sort of Sherman's other legacy is that he visited great destruction on white southerners but also an agent of emancipation.

ASR: Yeah, I think that's one of the great contradictions of Sherman in Sherman's march. That's the other thing, when people talk about the destruction and devastation of Sherman's march they're really talking about how it affected southern whites when in fact it's African Americans who in many ways bear sort

of the equal brunt of the destruction. If all of the food in an area is taken or ruined that's s arving African Americans as well as whites. Sherman was no friend to African Americans really he did not believe, for example, in African American troops. He did not have African Americans units marching with him and one of his subordinate commanders, in this event that you allude to at Ebenezer Creek in Georgia, where it's a big cypress swamp and the Union soldiers are crossing over pontoon bridges and they're being followed by hundreds if not thousands African Americans, the subordinate commander actually named Jefferson Davis--no relation to the Confederate president--orders the pontoon bridges pulled up and leaves these African Americans with Confederate cavalry closing in on them. Their choice is try to swim across, which many try and many drown, or to be captured and sent back into slavery, which is what happens to them. Sherman is ok with what happens he doesn't condemn Davis for this, but when the news reaches Washington the Secretary of War Stanton comes down and is chastising Sherman for this and saying you [Sherman] go to do something for African Americans. So they meet first with about twenty African American ministers in Savannah and say, "Well what do you want, what do you want to come out of the war?" And they say, "We want land." Sherman offers a suggestion so outlandish that [Stanton] will back off--this is Special Order 15 that they take all of this land that has been abandoned by whites who fled all along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, altogether about 400,000 acres, and divide it up into plots for African American families to settle on. From Sherman's perspective, that solves two problems. It gets Stanton off his back, and it means that these thousands of African American who've been following him will be resettled on this land and not continue to follow. And it happens that this plan is briefly put into effect, but I think the true test of it is that when Andrew Johnson, after the war, essentially voids it by returning all of this land to its original owners, Sherman doesn't say a word. He's moved on, he doesn't care. He is simultaneously this great liberator, and his army is a great army of liberation, but they're not willing motivators. They're not ideologically motivated.

CWBR: Sherman has quite a long career in fiction after the war and after he died, but it seems like that is kind of a theme--whether in emancipation, or in fiction, or in Lost Cause histories--of Sherman being this agent that causes things to happen, but he's not actually there. He's always sort of there, but off-frame. I thought that was sort of an interesting contrast, in your section on depictions in art and fiction, with somebody like Lee, who is like a King Arthur figure in a lot of depictions, always on his horse leading and a presence. I wonder if that is

indicative of how people imagine Sherman as an early practitioner of total war--do people more naturally imagine Sherman as hunched over a table of maps and troops strength readouts, sort of callously directing the logistics rather than galloping across a battlefield?

ASR: I don't know if I ever thought of that--I think your portrayal of him hunched over a map is more generous than what I think are stereotypical portrayals, which is sort of Sherman, wild-eyed, holding a torch, where Sherman is personally burning things everywhere he goes. Portrayals of Sherman are interesting. There are not a lot of portrayals of Sherman's march, certainly--The Mort Künstler, Don Troiani, those paintings that people love--are definitely more of a glorification of the war in Virginia. Sherman, though, does have such a long postwar career too. He's General-in-Chief of the Army for about another 15-20 years. One thing I was struck by was that when he died in 1891, there was this great outpouring of grief, a national outpouring of grief, with the black-bordered newspaper columns and the big funeral and all of that. So he was a big national figure, and doesn't have nearly the number of statues that Lee has, but he does have a few big statues. Specifically, the one in New York City at 59th Street, at the entrance to Central Park, there's also a large one in Washington D.C. So I don't know that he's that slighted. Although I will say that I grew up seeing that statue all the time and had no idea that it was Sherman until I started working on this book.

CWBR: Of course that could just be a function of being around a landmark, monuments all the time, you may not think to really look at it until you move away from it. But to backtrack a bit, I wanted to hear about the "bummers." You were sort of surprised by their postwar sentiments, right?

ASR: Yeah, because again, when you come of age in the post-Vietnam world, where so much of the writing about soldiers is in the vein of memoirs talking about post-traumatic stress, and soldiers who were asked to do terrible things, asked to make war on civilians, and they feel guilty about that and they feel traumatized by all that. You just don't find that with Sherman's "bummers," with the marchers. The big caveat to that, of course, is that I can only know what they wrote down. So certainly, the veterans who are gung-ho veterans, who belong to these veterans organizations and who go around and make speeches and all of that, are only one subset. They don't speak for all veterans, but the dominant story that they tell is one of tremendous pride in their service, tremendous pride in the march. They believed that they ended the war. I think

they're not wrong about that. The analogy that I draw is that they're sort of like the airmen on the *Enola Gay*, who believed that what they did was necessary, was right, and brought the war to a close. So they're not troubled by it, they're remarkably *untroubled* by it, I found. To them this was the great moment of their lives, the great experience of many of their lives.

CWBR: This march just keeps inspiring other people to try to experience it for themselves too. This experience thing [of Sherman's march], I don't know that it's stronger than with other events, because certainly people visit battlefields all the time, but retracing this entire march is a larger undertaking than visiting a battlefield park for a day. It inspires this peculiar form of travel writing from just after the war through present day, people travelling through the South, coming to wildly different conclusions over time by visiting the same locales, and you end up deciding to follow in their footsteps, so what was that like?

ASR: I felt like I couldn't really write about Sherman's march, because so much of what I write has to do with these specific places, that I didn't feel like I could do it without visiting them myself. I didn't retrace the entire march but I did about two-thirds to three-quarters of it. I did all of Georgia in 2008, then I did the North Carolina from the Bennett place from the surrender--to Columbia and then further south of Columbia. I actually did that in reverse, because I was driving down from Maryland. I found it really interesting. I thought that I would see a lot more memorialization. And I just didn't find as much as I thought I would. Even the roadside markers seemed more about troop movements, and not really the impact of the march. I found that surprising. There was also such a contrast in the way that Atlanta sort takes their Sherman experience of being burned right before Sherman leaves on the march, and they kind of run with it. Atlanta put the Phoenix on their city seal, and in a lot of way the march is kind of the best thing that ever happened to Atlanta, whereas I was really struck in Columbia by how much angrier Columbia seemed. Columbia seemed to still retain this sense of grievance from Sherman. I'm actually looking forward to a big symposium there on the anniversary of Sherman's burning the city. I was glad I got to go, and it will be interesting to go back. One of the fun side-effects of this book coming out is that I got to back to a few places. Even just seeing the names on the road signs again.

CWBR: Given how much more room you saw in the memorializations you mentioned, for added complexity that you show in the book here, moving the memory beyond just troop movements, do think that the memory of the march is

as fluid as it was in the past? Do you think we'll start to see a little of this complexity and contradiction work its way into the popular memory?

ASR: That's hard to say, I'd like to think that complexity and fluidity moves in. Certainly the Civil War Sesquicentennial in general has been a much more rich and diverse and complicated view of the war and what happened during the war, compared to the centennial. I'm by nature an optimist, so I'll say yes, I think our understating will become more complicated and more subtle, rather than fixed. So we'll close on an up note.

CWBR: Well Professor Rubin, I appreciate taking the time to sit and discuss with us your latest work, *Through the Heart of Dixie: Sherman's March and American Memory*.

ASR: Thank you so much, it was a pleasure.