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Gregory J. W. Urwin, ed. *Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004. xii + 265 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2546-7; $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8093-2678-5.

Reviewed by Michael DeGruccio (Department of History, University of Notre Dame)
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Exposing the "Lurid Interiors" of War

Gregory Urwin hopes that this collection of essays will provoke a meaningful discussion about the role race has "played in making American wars more barbaric" (p. xi). Through an autobiographical foray in the introduction the reader learns that this project, at some level, is a response to some of Urwin's regrettable experiences in the historical profession (above and below the Mason-Dixon), where historians and hobbyists have lashed out at Urwin for emphasizing the centrality of racial animosity instead of, say, honor or sacrifice in the Civil War. The fact that Urwin assumes this somewhat defensive position reminds us of what continues to be at stake when one tampers with the potent myths of the Civil War. This book adds further support to the arguments made by David Blight and Nina Silber that constructing war memories has less to do with recalling the past than it does with legitimating contemporary imbalances of power, or papering over tensions of gender, race and class.[1] Heated debates do not tend to spring up among antiquarian "pots and pans" historians who disagree about "facts," except when such "facts" have the potential of demystifying heroes, challenging contemporary power structures, or unearthing what generations have toiled to bury. This book does all three.

As is to be expected in any work of this kind, the collected essays at times read a bit unevenly. Held to Urwin's hope that the essays will "lead all Americans to see the Civil War not merely as a string of titanic battles but as a social revolution that still influences what it means to be American," (p. 11) some of the pieces, due to their narrow scope, fall a bit short of the editor's lofty hopes. Others, though, deftly integrate war atrocities into larger cultural patterns, Confederate and Union policy, and American culture and politics more broadly. For example, there is a splendid article by Derek W. Frisby which contextualizes the Fort Pillow Massacre in 1864, and more importantly, the ensuing congressional report, within the building tensions between Radical Republicans and President Lincoln. Frisby contends that Benjamin Wade, in particular, used the hastily assembled report to force Lincoln and other Americans during the election year to embrace a harder, more punitive war. In a similar vein, an article by David Coles demonstrates how election-year politics, and in particular Salmon P. Chase's mounting challenge to Lincoln's reelection, help explain why Federal troops engaged in the battle at Olustee, Florida, where Confederate soldiers committed atrocities on black troops. And Urwin's own article on racial atrocities and reprisals in Arkansas does what many of the other pieces fail to do by nesting the violence within a longer history of racial intimidation and panic that permeated white Southern society for over two hundred years.

Other essays include treatments of white-on-black massacres at Fort Pillow and the Battle of the Crater. There are also pieces that cover related issues like the policy of executing white officers from black units, the pervasiveness of white-on-black violence among Texas cavalrymen, the so-called "Christmas Insurrection Scare" of 1865, and the dilemma of Confederate officers–working

within a jumble of contradictory policies vis-à-vis black captives–trying to figure out what to do with recently captured black soldiers.

Weymouth Jordan Jr., and Gerald Thomas have co-authored an absorbing essay that examines the relatively obscure massacre that took place in Plymouth, North Carolina in April, 1864, a few months before the "Crater" tragedy. Their depth of research is impressive as they scour through a wide range of journals, letters, official reports, newspapers, memoirs, and family legends in order to peel away the obfuscating layers and help make some sense of one of the darker moments of the war. This essay underscores the nearly impossible task of recovering the "facts" of war atrocities. Surrounding the massacre at Plymouth one finds contradictory first-hand accounts, strange silences, false affidavits, southern-born soldiers in Union units who assumed the names and clothes of their dead northern counterparts in order to escape summary execution–only to die later in hellish prison camps with false names. Poor record keeping, the erasure of black women and children from "official" reports, and even what appears to be a fabricated eye-witness testimony from a nonexistent black soldier cast a haze around the Plymouth massacre, leaving the reader to wonder what really happened. Did some six hundred soldiers and civilians (most of them black) die at the hands and gunpoint of ruthless Rebel soldiers, or, as the authors suggest, were the numbers considerably lower, though sickening nonetheless?

It is this evidentiary haze that brings me to my fundamental gripe with this otherwise fine collection. As historians we must certainly try to be factual. And in regards to racial atrocities it clearly matters if fifteen black soldiers were clubbed to death as they begged on their knees, rather than, say, one hundred and fifty. But this reader began to wonder if an important endeavor like this collection is somehow weakened by its own quest for exactitude–its elusive chase for what Peter Novick has called "that noble dream" of achieving historical objectivity and factuality.[2] Sharing the temptation widely yielded to by many Civil War historians, at times this collection gets mired down in the desperate search for the "smoking gun." That is, occasionally this collection expends too much energy in the name of the commendable but elusive task of imposing clarity onto a chaotic struggle made up of duplicity and shadows. And in the hunt for numbers and certitude, larger questions seem to drop from view. As James Dawes has contended, the desire to count amid almost total confusion is not new to Civil War participants or its historians. "Counting," he writes, "is the epistemology of war." But Dawes also warns us that the obsession with history as facts that can be lined up, counted, and placed in a graph, can lend an aesthetic clarity to a war that was anything but clear.[3] In the frustrated search to verify, for example, whether eighty-five or thirty-five surrendering black soldiers were summarily executed, one begins to wonder as I did, not the "exact" body count, but what to make of this enormously convoluted corner of the war. How did this crisis in clarity lend itself to racial atrocities? What did black bodies signify? How did the destruction of black human tissue jibe with the larger goals of the new Confederate nation? What do these massacres have in common with American lynching? And what sorts of reactions to these decimated bodies can be found in the records of medical experts, specimen collectors, poets, and blacks themselves? These kinds of questions are rarely asked if at all. It is striking that in a collection like this that is, after all, centered on studying the purposeful destruction of black flesh, that there is not a lick of attention paid to Elaine Scarry's work on the relationship between war, pain and the body.[4]

Not until Mark Grimsley's conclusion entitled "A Very Long Shadow" are these various massacres extensively woven into a larger discussion of race in America. This essay alone makes this book worth adding to one's shelf. Most importantly, Grimsley underscores the ways in which these atrocities were not just a southern problem. Drum-head trials and executions, construction gangs, cut-off rations to slave families, excessive torture, the chronic lack of necessary victuals and medicine for black soldiers, naked violence between lower white officers and their black subordinates, and black men "recruited" at the end of an Enfield rifle–these are clearly an important, if not central, part of the so-called forged relationship between white officers and black soldiers. When one ponders the litany of small atrocities committed by Union soldiers on black soldiers it is tempting to deduce why the many "southern" atrocities are so hard to verify. When Confederate soldiers crushed wounded black men's skulls like eggshells, there may have been fewer northern soldiers who were willing to expose such brutality than we would like to believe.

When Walt Whitman–who spent much of the war years listening to the quiet confessions and fears of wounded soldiers–wrote about the "black infernal background of countless minor scenes" and the "lurid interiors" of the war, he added that they should not and probably would not make it into the books.[5] Well, at least some of these "lurid interiors" have indeed made it

into *Black Flag over Dixie*, but as Whitman foresaw, only fragmentarily. As Grimsley puts it, the essays found in *Black Flag over Dixie* make up only "the first generation of scholarship" regarding Confederate atrocities against black troops. (Some of the essays are a bit dated, yet seminal. One essay was first published in 1958.) Future work will need to complement the quest for exact numbers with a wider scope that takes into account the deep roots of violence and racism on both sides on the Mason-Dixon. It will also need to ask more penetrating questions about how these massacres relate to bodies, religion, the culture of silence (from participants and witnesses), the chaotic and "unmaking" effects of war, and the American tradition of lynching.

Whatever the second generation of scholarship accomplishes, it will, no doubt, be built on the foundation laid by some of these essays. Any historian who pretends to know something about race, violence and the American Civil War should be familiar with this collection. Still, other related works of scholarship are sorely needed to accompany *Black Flag over Dixie* on our shelves and in the classroom. Urwin's hopes that these essays will "stimulate" more research that will eventually lead Americans to see the Civil War not as a series of titanic battles, but as a "social revolution" is a tall order and a tad Olympian. But *Black Flag* forces us to at least reckon with these atrocities–to appreciate their pervasiveness and scale, and to see them as part of a pattern–in a way that no single publication has done. Lastly, this work could not be timelier as it prods us to plumb closer to home. These dark corners of the great American war remind us, as we stare into the shadows of another, wincing at what we find at Abu Ghraib or Haditha, that the more violent portions of our nation's past have been passed down and remain deep in our bones.

Notes

[1]. David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); and Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

[2]. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[3]. James Dawes, *The Language of War: Literature and Culture in the U.S. from the Civil War through World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 29.

[4]. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). For a current work that has looked at the relationship between war, bodies and pain see Franny Nudelman, *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence, & the Culture of War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[5]. Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days & Collect* (Glasgow: Wilson & McCormick, 1883), pp. 80-81.

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