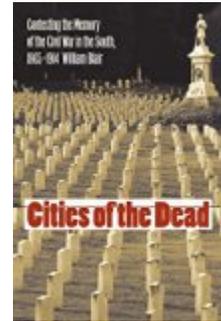


William Blair. *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xii + 250 pp. \$ 34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2896-0.

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The Hidden Politics of Civil War Memory

In the crowded literature on the American Civil War, William Blair's subtle and well-researched *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914* breaks new ground in its examination of the commemorations with which southerners made sense of the war in the fifty years after it ended. Blair focuses on the emergence and evolution of Emancipation Days and Memorial Days in postbellum Virginia, using some additional sources from South Carolina, Louisiana, and other states. By examining how southerners commemorated the war and how these commemorations quickly took on the mantle of time-honored traditions, he reveals the attitudes and strategies of individuals who otherwise left few records of their changing beliefs about the war. The book's scope is more ambitious than this, too. More than merely exposing changing political attitudes, Blair convincingly argues that Civil War commemorations "were politics and power" (p. x).

Commemorations, indeed, were a natural place for politics to retreat. Civil War commemorations took place in an era "when an active street culture still formed a basis for politics," and in the immediate postbellum years, northerners and southern African Americans scrutinized the actions of former Confederates for evidence that they accepted military defeat and the end of slavery (p. 105). In early Reconstruction, as political marches and the display of Confederate flags and Rebel uniforms were forbidden, white southerners successfully defended their right to hold Decoration Days by insisting on the explicitly non-political nature of honoring the dead. Too many

historians have bought the argument, Blair contends, misled in part because the resulting ceremonies were ostentatiously solemn affairs that successfully transmitted a message of staid submission. Far from a reflection of genuine demoralization, however, Blair finds evidence that the ceremonies' outward forms were pragmatic responses to critical supervision and that "whenever allowed, a more militant display occurred" (p. 63).

In the first decades after the war, any groups featured in Confederate ceremonies at all were outwardly apolitical organizations like church groups and ladies memorial societies. The civil domesticity of white women, Blair argues, became one of the few accepted ways of expressing Confederate nationalism. As a result, southern women assumed extraordinary control over the tone and content of commemorations, justifying their public activity by pointing to their supposedly instinctive sentimentality. Blair argues that enduring sectional hostility found safe haven in what came to be defined as a women's commemorative domain, a definition that eventually allowed renewed expressions of militant Confederate pride as advocates of reconciliation "fondly remembered only the gentle hand that decorated graves instead of rituals that helped forge a consensus on resistance during difficult political times" (p. 97).

Supervision of Confederate commemorations slackened by the late nineteenth century, but African American freedom celebrations, widely recognized at the time as politically loaded events, continued to carry "the bur-

den of proving the worthiness of their subjects” (p. 200). Emancipation Day events often emphasized the middle class respectability and the corresponding political competence of their participants, and ceremonies sometimes included public vows of temperance or highlighted the industry of African American women’s groups. Elections in early Reconstruction were often close, and Emancipation Days at times became local political conventions of a sort. For decades, freedom celebrations featured the theme of self-reliance, which Blair sees as a political strategy that sought to forge an independent black electorate.

Blair gives fascinating examples of the ways material considerations shaped commemorative traditions, perhaps the best example of which is the heated debate among African Americans over not just how but when to celebrate Emancipation Day. Should celebrations take place on the day when one of the Confederate armies had surrendered? Or on the anniversary of the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which had outlawed slavery? Or should celebrations commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation? While most African Americans leaned toward this last option, the fact that Lincoln had issued two Emancipation proclamations—the preliminary proclamation in September, in the middle of the busy cotton harvest, and the second in January, when inclement weather would likely limit possibilities for celebration—complicated efforts to forge a single freedom holiday. In the end, no consensus emerged and people in different regions continued to celebrate Emancipation Day on different dates, when they still celebrated it.

As it became clear by the 1880s that the Republican Party’s commitment to black rights was evaporating, African American commemorative strategies changed. In speeches commemorating emancipation, African Americans focused less on Lincoln and more on God’s will. By the 1890s, the rise of Jim Crow rule and widespread African American disenfranchisement drove the theme of political self-help from public view. By the early twentieth century, many African Americans expressed mixed feelings about celebrating Emancipation Day at all, since it seemed increasingly to provide painful, embarrassing, and dangerous reminders of recent enslavement. By the 1910s, Emancipation Days became a way for whites to encourage accommodationism, as white public officials gave financial support to those ceremonies that acknowledged white superiority and stressed a non-political brand of racial uplift.

Meanwhile, the reconciliation of white southerners

and northerners was in full swing. Blair argues that one of the basic preconditions for sectional reconciliation was the rehabilitation of the Confederate veteran, who by the late nineteenth century was hailed in public ceremonies as a national hero motivated by a fundamentally American love of independence, a definition of liberty tied to states’ rights and removed from any association with slavery. The depoliticization of the Confederate veteran worked in tandem with the remilitarization of Confederate ceremonies. To the sounds of “Dixie” and the cheering of 100,000 onlookers, many wearing Rebel uniforms, a massive statue of Robert E. Lee was unveiled in Richmond in 1890. Blair argues that the erection of the Lee monument, which took place amidst the waving of both Confederate and Union flags, signaled the turn towards a vision of the Lost Cause as cause for jubilation rather than mourning.

The book concludes with a chapter on the shifting significance of Arlington National Cemetery, as it metamorphosed in the fifty years after its founding from an emblem of sectional strife to the epicenter of reconciliation. Created on the former estate of Robert E. Lee, which the U.S. government seized during the war for failure to pay taxes, Arlington became the largest burial ground for the bodies of Union soldiers, whose well-kept and well-funded graves irked white southerners who had to scrimp together private funds to rebury their war dead. After decades of federal neglect of Confederate dead, however, in late 1898, just weeks after the massacre of African Americans in Wilmington, North Carolina, William McKinley announced that the federal government would create a Confederate section in Arlington national cemetery. According to Blair, McKinley was motivated in part by a desire to garner southern support for overseas expansion. The Confederate memorial statue in Arlington is the highest monument in the cemetery and features images of loyal, contented slaves. Blair writes convincingly that almost anyone “transported magically from the North of the 1860s to the dedication of the Confederate monument in Arlington would have found the occasion difficult to comprehend” (p. 174), yet what is striking is how natural many whites found reconciliation as it happened.

Blair is careful to delineate his place among the historians who have already worked on the memory of the Civil War, and the major historical work he addresses is clearly David Blight’s *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Blair’s work generally complements Blight’s, though Blair usefully argues that reconciliation was a goal of a much broader swath

of people than historians have identified before. White supremacists, African Americans, moderate Conservative southerners, and Radical Republicans, among other groups, all at times had much to gain politically by advocating sectional reconciliation. One problem with the way Blair locates himself in the historiography of Civil War memory, however, is his point that he is more concerned with how the past “was used” than with “how it was constructed” (p. x). This distinction would seem a rather central point in a book whose focus is the contestation of memory, but unfortunately Blair provides scant further indication of what he means by it. He goes on to detail how white and black southerners imagined or selected for emphasis those parts of the past that best suited their changing needs and desires, but how this “use” of

the past differs from what other historians mean by “construction” of the past remains frustratingly unclear.

William Blair’s *City of the Dead* is a useful and sophisticated work that reveals the syncretic relationship between politics and memory. Especially helpful as a historiographical intervention is Blair’s insistence that a variety of political motors drove reconciliation. Instead of tracing the genealogy of memory by identifying shifts in consensus, Blair revels in deviations and negotiations, and through them he artfully exposes the plethora of ways, none of them inevitable, that memories of the Civil War emerged. By denaturalizing Civil War commemorations, Blair deepens historians’ understanding of the profound political complexities of the postbellum American South.

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