

H-Net Reviews

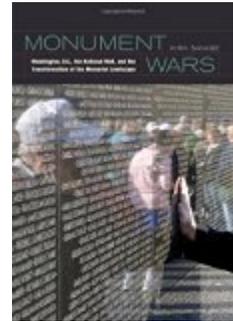
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kirk Savage. *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. x + 390 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25654-5.

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The Historical Memory and Tourist Paths

While there has been a good deal of historical and descriptive writing in recent years about the National Mall and its countless monuments, such as the huge and controversial World War II plaza, *Monument Wars* by Kirk Savage is one of the few books to take on the larger significance of the development of these grounds and structures on the face of the national capital. And a fascinating book it is.

As one who was born in the city, I have long collected books and reports that detail the physical development of the metro area, especially what John Reys and others have dubbed the “Monumental Core” so well known to most Americans. Yet to be able to say something new about the iconic Mall or the Lincoln Memorial, let alone many now-ignored statues in out-of-the-way corners of the city, takes some doing. Happily, Savage has done just that in his admirable examination that lets us see these places with new eyes. Among many other points, he makes clear that the Mall we know today has less to do with city designer Pierre L’Enfant’s original concept than many of us think.

A professor and the chair of the art and architecture department at the University of Pittsburgh, Savage has a prior book to his credit, an award winner, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (1998). Many of the themes and places recorded there reappear here in a different context. The “kneeling slaves,” for example, are found

in a more than century-old statue of Abraham Lincoln in a square named for him, located east of the Capitol building, one that has not been on the tourist path for years.

Those changing tourist paths are themselves an eye-opener. Back in the late nineteenth century, and for some years thereafter, many companies and individuals offered tours to the city’s growing number of statues and memorials that were cropping up in the many circles and squares that are a feature of L’Enfant’s original layout. Often complex carriage or walking routes were suggested. In other words, people would come to Washington to visit memorials to soldiers (well, mostly generals) and politicians, and not just the growing museum community on the Mall. Savage explains that these memorials played a far more central role in the nation’s sense of itself than they do today.

And therein lies the central message of this eminently readable volume: the changing role of monuments and memorials in society generally can readily be traced on the streets of Washington. Statues, once the subject of veneration or at least attention, have long since been ignored by tourists who focus their time on Mall-based attractions. And given the lack of historical knowledge, let alone interest, by a growing proportion of Americans, if they do find themselves near a memorial—such as the large three-part sculpture honoring Ulysses S. Grant at the foot of Capitol Hill—they often lack any idea who is being celebrated or why.

Given that social change, it is hard to believe how bitter some of the fights over these memorials once were. The long-accepted Lincoln and Jefferson memorials, for example, were both subject to protracted debate as to their location and design. So were the more recent and hugely different commemorations of World War II and the Vietnam War. Yet the latter is now one of the most visited sites on the Mall. (Not far away is an uncontroversial but neglected memorial—the handsome pantheon commemorating the District of Columbia’s losses in World War I. Few see it today as it is lost in the trees lining the Reflecting Pool. It is now designated for restoration.)

Part of Washington’s planning problem, of course, is the overlapping jurisdiction of so many federal players in the city. The Mall is under the control of many players, depending where you stand—the National Park Service, the Smithsonian, DC police, the Architect of the Capitol, and so on. Savage relates this and the continuing push-pull between the little known but powerful Commission of Fine Arts and District or federal planners of past and future memorials. It has long been recognized that not everything can be squeezed onto the Mall, though Congress, ignoring its own resolutions to

the contrary, keeps making exceptions.

The meld of monument design and location controversies past and present makes this book compelling reading. For example, the story of how the Mall we know came to be (though bearing little resemblance to what L’Enfant intended) Savage relates especially well. The famous McMillan Commission Report issued at the opening of the twentieth century has for more than one hundred years largely controlled how the formal Mall has been developed. But, as Savage makes clear, its present form owes much more to the city beautiful movement of the late nineteenth century than to anything L’Enfant conceived a century earlier. Indeed, how defining concepts of “memorial” and “public space” have changed are made clear as Savage relates the story of monuments that feature in the numerous parks, plazas, and circles that dot the city.

Monument Wars, then, is a story of political and artistic compromise over nearly two centuries. It is also a tale of changing institutions and conflicting individuals, some of them more interesting than the stone monuments they created. As is made clear on these pages, the city’s and the nation’s maturation is reflected in those stones.

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