

H-Net Reviews

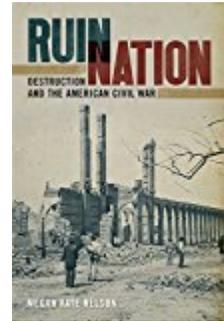
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Megan Kate Nelson. *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012. 400 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3397-7; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-4251-1.

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Ruin Begets Creation

In an attempt to reconceptualize the destruction caused by the American Civil War “as an imagined state, an act of destruction, and a process of change,” Megan Kate Nelson innovatively combines environmental and cultural history methodologies (p. 9). Using an interdisciplinary approach, Nelson explores how Americans—Northern, Southern, black, white, female, and male—interpreted the large-scale obliteration of cities, houses, forests, and soldiers’ bodies. By emphasizing ruin as both a metaphor and a reality, the author proves that the Civil War both destroyed and created, which allowed many Americans to cope with the war and to find a common ground in spite of the national divisiveness.

To demonstrate that ruin affected all aspects of life between 1861 and 1865, Nelson divides her work into the destruction of urban areas, individual houses, wilderness, and soldiers’ bodies, specifically amputees. She aims to show that almost every soldier and civilian encountered the fragments of war in some form. By organizing her work into these four sections, Nelson strives to illustrate that Americans understood these ruins in different ways depending on who they were, where they lived, the type of object destroyed, the moment in time, and the perpetrators. The author illuminates that both Northerners and Southerners reacted in similar or identical ways to wartime ruination. For example, Nelson maintains that all types of ruins (whether they were scarred soldiers’ bodies, flattened forests, burned cities, or raided homes) were short-lived and all Americans were able to wipe the

ruin from their consciousness and start anew.

Beginning with an environmental history approach, Nelson examines the narratives and images that Americans produced as they confronted architectural ruins—cities and houses. Both soldiers and civilians used the devastation to explain the “savage” nature of men on both sides. Even if the destruction was a result of military necessity and strategy, civilians saw it as barbarity. For instance, Union soldiers destroyed Southern homes as revenge and deterrence against guerrillas. Yet, Southerners saw such as a breach of privacy, humanity, and proof of Union savagery. Likewise, the invasions into the domestic sphere proved that Northern soldiers were barbarians. To Southerners, this was “personal pillage” (p. 79). Nevertheless, as Nelson reveals later, Southerners also used destruction as a form of revenge when they burned Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. According to the author, both Union and Confederate soldiers, who accidentally or deliberately created domestic ruins, understood such as the expected consequence of warfare. So although they may have disagreed on the motives, many soldiers accepted the debris and found a common ground through destruction and ruin.

Likewise, even though the image of flattened forests disturbed people and stirred up anxieties about the impact of wartime technologies on nature, both soldiers and civilians perceived the devastation of roads, rivers, and forests as predictable and natural. Yet, like the destruc-

tion of towns and buildings, these ruins quickly disappeared from vision and consciousness and led to rebirth. For example, although frequent marches led to many roads' deterioration, repairs resulted in the roads' widening. Such devastation resulted in the mass macadamizing of roads in the South. Furthermore, the obliteration of trees and undergrowth allowed for new saplings to fill their fallen forefathers' places. Similar to the ruination of cities and homes, such devastation led to renewal.

Unlike cities, houses, and forests, however, Americans did not easily forget or cope with the high number of mutilated soldiers' bodies after the war. While they were still ephemeral (men eventually die), the prevalence of amputees stirred countless anxieties about wartime technologies and the possibility of the "machine man" (p. 161). Therefore, while Nelson's examination of the destruction of cities, houses, and forests is enlightening, her cultural analysis of wartime amputees is especially profound. Adding to the historiography, Nelson proves that historians have overlooked the cultural significance of the "missing and rebuilt limbs" of veterans (p. 9). By examining the "empty sleeves and government legs" that haunted postbellum cities and towns, the author shows that, like the urban and natural ruins, bodies held their own symbolic meaning and source of rebirth (p. 161). Nelson argues that for the American public—both Northern and Southern—disfigured men presented a

problem for postbellum society, because they threatened Americans' concepts of masculinity and even humanity. Nelson also maintains that mutilated men even destabilized beliefs about citizenship and restructured Americans' thoughts on death in general. Nelson's innovative analysis of the impact caused by more than a million shattered and broken men is by far the strength of her work.

The one shortcoming of Nelson's work is her range of sources. Although she cites an impressive number of primary and secondary sources, the archives' locations are limited. Most of her Northern sources come from Massachusetts and Connecticut, and her Southern sources are from Virginia and Georgia, with a few exceptions. This reviewer would have liked to see more analysis of the old Southwest and the Union's destruction of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Although these states did not endure the same brutality as Virginia or Georgia, their residents still experienced the "hard hand of war" and deserve attention.[1] Although Nelson did not look at these states in depth, her work lays the foundation for other scholars to tackle the subject.

Note

[1]. Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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