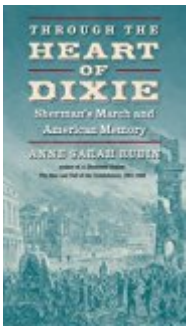
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anne Sarah Rubin. *Through the Heart of Dixie: Sherman's March and American Memory.* Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 320 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-1777-0.



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Published on H-SAWH (January, 2015)

Commissioned by Lisa A. Francavilla (The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series and Jefferson Quotes & Family Letters)

In *Through the Heart of Dixie: Sherman's March and American Memor*y, Anne Sarah Rubin presents the many stories that have been told about Union General William T. Sherman's infamous March to the Sea in late 1864. She is interested in showing how these stories emerged and evolved over time, rather than discerning which are more accurate. Rubin writes that "this project explores the myriad ways in which Americans have retold and reimagined Sherman's March," and she examines several groups' stories about this event, starting with "the participants themselves, including white Southerners, African Americans, Union soldiers." Drawing on "travel accounts, memoirs, music, literature, film, and newspapers," she aims to unpack "the many myths and legends that have grown up around the March, using them as a lens into the ways that Americans' thoughts about the Civil War have changed over time" (p. 4).

The book begins with an overview of the march, setting the stage for Rubin's analysis. She captures the confusion of the campaign, showing foraging and destruction, but also acts of kindness. She discusses the complicated relationship between the march and African Americans who came into its path. Rubin stresses that the Union army was not wholly made up of abolitionist proponents and showcases events, like the abandonment of black camp followers at Ebenezer Creek, to demonstrate the callous and strategic choices the military made in the context of complicated racial views and the realities of war.

Not surprisingly, different groups told different stories about Sherman's march. White Southerners saw the march as indicative of Northern excess and rapacity. Rubin focuses on stories told about Southern women hiding their valuables and livestock and Northern soldiers stealing, although she only briefly discusses rape and assault, which is surprising given later accusations of such crimes. In contrast to legends about Sherman's scorched-earth policy, Rubin points out that a large percentage of buildings were not burned,

and Southerners had to come up with creative explanations for unaffected structures. According to Rubin, one of the most common ways to explain a structure's survival was to link it to the Freemasons, which conveyed a sort of Passover message, in that if the Masonic symbol was displayed, the building was spared. Alongside such conspiracy theories stood stories about Northern kindness, especially tales of soldiers helping women and children. Rubin's work could have benefitted from further analysis of when these stories circulated and whether there was any indication that some narratives were more popular in certain contexts.

African Americans also told stories about the march and were often part of tales spun about it. Stories ranged from the predictable "faithful slave" narratives white Southerners told, to tales of liberation. Throughout, Rubin explains how "Sherman's March was the epitome of the double-edged sword," bringing not only emancipation but also "hunger, destruction, and mistreatment" for African Americans (p. 69). Throughout her analysis, Rubin stresses the ambivalence soldiers felt about emancipation, showing that the cause for which Union soldiers fought was more complicated than the view that many Americans continue to espouse. Although such complexity strengthens the book's argument, more discussion on how black audiences received these stories would have been helpful.

Rubin suggests that "the importance of the March for African Americans seemed to wane over the twentieth century," but it returned to importance in the 1960s with the intersection of the centennial of the march and the civil rights movement. When John Lewis, newly elected chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), wanted to use rhetoric about the march in his speech for the 1963 March on Washington, other civil rights leaders considered it too incendiary and told him to change it. Reformers seeking peaceful change needed to avoid symbols of conquest and violence, no matter how important they were historically.

Northern soldiers, the "bummers" in the Union ranks, and Sherman himself told stories that focused on the justification of the march. Rubin stresses that nineteenth-century soldiers were different and should not be compared to their twentieth-century counterparts—for instance, Union soldiers reflected on the march in a "light or celebratory fashion" (pp. 97-98). Further, Union soldiers pushed back against the Lost Cause narrative—they wanted to "make sure that their version of the March dominated" (p. 98). This meant spinning tales that emphasized the Union and ending slavery as well as the restraint of soldiers and the triumph of the good over the evils of rebellion and oppression. Rubin notes that Sherman and his march became inseparable in memory and the general worked hard to present his own version of events. His own actions during the aftermath influenced historical memory. In the years just after the war, white Southerners were willing to forget Sherman's destruction because he advocated for a gentler reconstruction. But in the 1880s, Southern views toward Sherman became much more negative, perhaps because Sherman's march "was being conflated with the economic challenges of Reconstruction, and a sense of nostalgia for an imagined golden age." Rubin notes that "Sherman became the symbolic repository for white Southerners frustrations" (p. 132).

Finally, Rubin examines the literature, songs, and movies inspired by the march. These chapters are perhaps the most illuminating and illustrate the divide in interpretations. Rubin joins other recent scholars like Caroline E. Janney (***Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation*** [2013]) in pointing toward a more complicated view of reunion. Rather than seeing it as a process that proceeded linearly, she notes the twists and turns that the rapprochement between the North and South took. For example, in 1902, a Louisville, Kentucky, schoolgirl refused to

sing or listen to the Unionist classic, "Marching through Georgia." The girl was hailed as a Confederate hero because of the incident. "That this sense of sectional grievance persisted even during what historians have told us was the peak of reunionist sentiment, after the Spanish-American War, is telling," Rubin suggests, before adding that "beneath the placid surface of joint reunions and Southern whites fighting under the American flag again, lay a deep well of animosity" (p. 182).

This study is an excellent addition to the flourishing literature on Civil War memory, and scholars and Civil War enthusiasts will find it interesting. In her commitment to examining the many different stories told about the march, Rubin shows how contested one event can be and how different people work to present their own narratives and construct their own memories of the past.