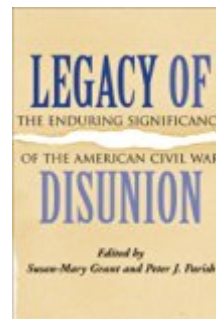


**Susan-Mary Grant, Peter J. Parish, eds..** *Legacy of Disunion: The Enduring Significance of the American Civil War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003. viii + 267 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-2847-3.



**Reviewed by** W. Scott Poole

**Published on** H-CivWar (August, 2003)

In late 1865, an elderly white southern woman in Richmond, carrying a parcel of rations supplied by Federal troops, encountered one of those occupying soldiers on her way home. The Federal soldier, seeing the woman faltering under the burden, offered to assist her. Walking through the war-ruined city, the aged Confederate lady turned primly to the young soldier and said, "Young man, you Yankees are not as horrid as I've believed. I hope that if there is a cool spot in hell that you will find it."

The bitterness over defeat expressed by the aged Virginia matron certainly represents one, but only one, legacy of the American Civil War. *Legacy of Disunion*, an excellent new collection edited by Susan-Mary Grant and the late Peter J. Parish, fully explores northern, southern, and even world historical consequences of the war. The essays are arranged into three sections, examining the influence of mythic thinking in the remembrance of the war; detailing how the conflict transformed American politics and political culture, and, in part 3, exploring, creatively and spec-

ulatively, the larger, global consequences of America's bloodiest conflict.

The story of the unreconstructed octogenarian above points to a crucial aspect of the war's legacy, namely the embittered response of the South to defeat and, on some level, the refusal to accept the consequences of that defeat. Much of part 1 is devoted to this topic, with the most intriguing essay contributed by Charles Joyner. Joyner, a South Carolina historian and, in his youth, a civil rights activist, writes a highly personal discussion of the South's "tragic past." Connecting the effort of the South to secede to contemporary examples of what Joyner calls "separatist nationalism," Joyner insists that his own love for the South does not compel "reverence for the Confederacy." Joyner closes by drawing on a very old theme in the history of southern identity, the notion that the American South, in part because of its tragic past, has the possibility of finding both wisdom and compassion if only it will look at "the myth of Confederate nationalism and the realities of racial and class injustice" (p. 29).

Joyner's very personal essay is followed by a much more traditional, though no less fascinating, analysis of the role played by secession's legacy in the culture of the American South. Bruce Collins argues convincingly that one of the primary influences of the conflict on the southern mind has been its continued fascination with military prowess and martial glory. Collins notes that this southern fascination has carried over, perhaps, in too much writing about the war, writing that focuses heavily on "the Confederate's individual commitment to heroism" (p. 47). Collins's essay also provides a good counterpoint to Joyner's perhaps overly optimistic hope that the southerner in defeat might learn "wisdom and compassion." Collins writes instead that the South learned little from its experience and, arguing from the perspective of global history, notes that this should not surprise us. After all, he notes, the defeat of France in the Napoleonic wars did not prevent the rise of "Bonapartism" again after 1848 nor did militarism die in Germany after 1918 (p. 44).

Two other essays round out this section. "Unfinished Business," Robert Cook's latest reflections on the celebration of the Civil War centennial in the 1960s, provides us with both a much needed discussion of the use of Confederate imagery by twentieth-century southern segregationists and some perspective on the African-American response to that imagery. Section 1 concludes with a somewhat disappointing essay on the Civil War in film by Melvyn Stokes. Stokes argues the easily proven point that *Gone with the Wind* has likely had more impact on the American imagination about the Civil War than any other film. Some odd assertions crop up, including Stokes's insistence that "there is no Ku Klux Klan" in *Gone with the Wind*; it is true that they are not mentioned by name but even the genteel Ashley Wilkes goes night-riding. Stokes also notes his agreement with the late C. Vann Woodward that novelists have tended to ignore the Civil War, yet in the wake of Shelby Foote's epic masterpiece and the more re-

cent *Cold Mountain* Stokes's assertion appears highly problematic.

Section 2 of the collection takes the reader into the realm of politics, with a particular focus on the political culture of the North. In "Contested Legacy," Peter J. Parish and Adam I. P. Smith examine what they call "the strange survival of the Republican party" and argue that Union victory in the Civil War permitted, though it did not insure, the survival of a party likely to go the way of the Free Soilers, the Liberty Party, or the Know-Nothings. The party's survival meant that later debates over both Reconstruction and progressive reform would become struggles over "the public meaning of the war," influencing national political life far more than previous political historians have recognized (p. 84). Jeffery Leigh Sedgwick's "Abraham Lincoln and the Character of Liberal Statesmanship" examines the antebellum rhetoric of Lincoln and his use of language to evoke affective ties of obligation to the rather abstract concept of Union. Sedgwick's interesting exploration seems out of place in this collection, focusing not on the legacy of the war but rather on an early stage in Lincoln's political development. Section 2 includes a discussion of Lincoln by Peter J. Parish, who argues for the crucial role that the enduring image of Lincoln has played in the construction of twentieth-century American nationalism. James McPherson's contribution rounds out section 2 with yet another essay on Lincoln, a reflection on the meaning of what Lincoln called "a new birth of freedom." McPherson cites the end of slavery in Brazil and Cuba, the British Reform Bill of 1867, and the changed understanding of liberty embodied in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments as examples of the growth of democratic institutions the world over since the end of the American Civil War.

Section 3 includes four essays that ponder the larger consequences of the Civil War in contexts as diverse as the Civil War and the evolution of military tactics, the development of American

constitutionalism, and the Civil War's influence on nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism. Ironically, these essays speak, in very cautionary tones, about the influence of the American Civil War, suggesting that continuity rather than change followed the war's end. Brian Holden Reid, for example, argues that few innovations to either the command structure or civilian-military relations came as a result of the conflict. Reid notes that American military leaders continued to be suspicious of the ideas introduced by the modernizing armies of Europe (specifically Moltke's "General Staff revolution" in Imperial Germany) well into the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Richard Current, in a highly speculative but very acute essay, argues that the Civil War "discouraged more than it encouraged the rise of the United States as a world power" (p. 221). Susan-Mary Grant also calls into question a number of assumptions about the war's legacy, arguing that viewing the Civil War as the womb of American nationalism constitutes an act of "selective memory." Northern and southern veterans worked together to create a "powerful mythos" that surrounded the war. This mythos, Grant shows, has found its way into theoretical discussions of national formation, often lending symbolic support to otherwise tenuous arguments for American exceptionalism. Patricia Lucie's essay, concerning the influence and power of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments or the "Civil War amendments," argues that the meaning of the American Civil War is still being debated in constitutional law. Far from simply freeing the slaves and granting the protections of citizenship and franchise, these amendments have become the locus of judicial debates over the contemporary meaning of racial equality and have been raised to answer "modern dilemmas of gender identity and equality, access to contraceptives and control over the technology of death" (p. 172).

The editors of *Legacy of Disunion* have produced a very valuable and highly original collection. Indeed, many of the essays should find their

way to a larger audience than Civil War scholars and enthusiasts. Grant's and perhaps McPherson's essays would prove useful in a survey course on Modern World Civilization, allowing students to use a popular topic to reflect on the world-historical consequences of modern events. Deftly organized and well crafted, this collection does much for those wishing to explore the uncertain legacy of America's Civil War.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

**Citation:** W. Scott Poole. Review of Grant, Susan-Mary; Parish, Peter J., eds. *Legacy of Disunion: The Enduring Significance of the American Civil War*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. August, 2003.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8081>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.