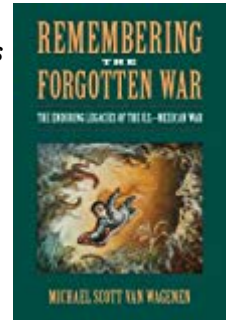


Michael Scott Van Wagenen. *Remembering the Forgotten War: The Enduring Legacies of the U.S.-Mexican War.* Public History in Historical Perspective Series. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. Illustrations. xvi + 329 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55849-929-4.



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In this meticulous study about the legacies of the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-48), Michael Scott Van Wagenen reminds readers that the history of remembering is also the history of forgetting. As with other memory histories of war, he demonstrates how politics and communities have shaped remembrance to advance specific agendas. Quite unlike previous scholars of memory, however, the author takes a comparative approach by following the divergent paths and analyzing the methods of memory and amnesia with which Mexicans mitigated defeat and U.S. citizens redefined a complicated victory.

From the Mexican perspective, Van Wagenen charts the many ways in which cultural and political leaders salvaged patriotic meaning from the initial humiliation of conquest. They created narratives of loyal citizens sacrificing themselves to defend the homeland against overwhelming odds. “Mexico’s celebration of the War of North American Intervention demonstrated that a devastating loss has no bearing on the power of memory. In the right hands, defeat may create even more po-

tent symbols than victory” (p. 100). The Niños Héroes, or Boy Heroes, served as one of the most enduring, yet elastic, memories from the conflict. Wartime accounts of the battle of Chapultepec mentioned that cadets of the Military College housed there joined in the defense against U.S. invaders, but the memorializing and myth creation probably did not begin until the 1867 publication of a poem by José Tomás de Cuéllar. Four years later, the public began annual commemorations at the fortress. The Niños Héroes narrative achieved national scope when President Porfirio Díaz openly supported these celebrations. According to Van Wagenen, Díaz co-opted their symbolism as a way to solidify the support of a centralized military by emphasizing the role of the cadets over the contribution of the National Guard, elements of which supported rivals to the president.

The story of the Niños Héroes continued to evolve. In 1894, a new account identified cadet Juan Escuita as performing an act of self-sacrifice. According to this version, Escuita took down the

Mexican flag that flew over Chapultepec, wrapped himself in it, then jumped from the summit to his death rather than allow the national banner to fall to the enemy. Through the end of Díaz's reign in 1911, the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), and the decades beyond, Mexican political and cultural leaders continued to use the narrative of Escuita and the Niños Héroes in commemorations and school textbooks to instill national patriotism. The story may have inspired cadets at the Naval Military School to resist the 1914 U.S. landing at Vera Cruz, resulting in two deaths. That moment, Van Wagenen observes, "speaks both to their personal courage and to the power of memory in educating and inspiring a devoted, loyal citizenry" (p. 98). In the 1960s, however, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz attempted to use the familiar narrative to rally support of students, but many rejected his authoritarian regime, and during a 1968 protest, he used the police and military to stop the demonstration, killing hundreds. Their deaths inspired one survivor to declare that they had become the "modern Niños Héroes" (p. 184).

The United States also wrestled with the meaning of conquest after the war. U.S. citizens did not like to view themselves as invaders and developed a number of narratives that would ameliorate culpability, such as justifying expansion as an inevitable force or providential design. They also shifted the blame to groups deemed less American, such as faulting the South for expansion as a slave-power conspiracy. By the mid-1850s the growing sectional crisis and the Civil War overshadowed memories of the previous conflict. Unlike Mexican leaders who adhered to a meaningful narrative of the war, cultural and political leaders in the United States found it more useful to forget the conflict and to ignore its troubling legacies.

Van Wagenen, nevertheless, locates numerous moments when groups in the United States tapped into the memory of the invasion of Mexico. In the 1880s, U.S. veterans of the conflict lobbied to obtain pensions from the federal government, but the question of eligibility of those who had fought against the United States in the Confederate army, including Jefferson Davis, complicated their efforts. A century later, a number of military reenactors sought refuge in memorializing the U.S.-Mexican War, escaping from the Civil War ceremonies dominated by neo-Confederates. In the 1940s, few states marked the centennial of the war, but California used the memory of conquest as way to redefine Anglo-American supremacy in the face of immigration from Mexico, China, and Japan. Van Wagenen excels in uncovering these and many other moments of remembering and forgetting in both Mexico and the United States. He expertly places them within his larger interpretive skein, demonstrating the utility and malleability of memory.

In contrast to Van Wagenen's stated intent, the bulk of the study is more comparative than transnational. The Chicano movement that emerged in the United States in the 1960s, for example, drew heavily on remembering the U.S.-Mexican War, but these citizens of Mexican descent did not necessarily draw on memories that originated in Mexico. Chicano remembrance emphasized occupation and dislocation over martyrdom and invasion. Instead, the few interactions between Mexican and U.S. memories most often occurred in the sphere of diplomacy. U.S. leaders, for example, paid homage at the Niños Héroes monument when they needed Mexican support for an international program. In 1897, the fiftieth anniversary of the fall of Chapultepec, U.S. minister Powell Clayton honored their memory as tensions between the United States and Spain heightened in the Caribbean. At the centennial in 1947, President Harry S. Truman laid a wreath at a time when he needed Mexican backing to establish the Organization of American States. Yet another fifty years later in 1997, President Bill Clinton also placed a wreath at the monument seeking ap-

proval for the North American Free Trade Agreement.

In the past twenty-five years, however, Mexican and U.S. historians have engaged in transnational reorientations of interpreting the war and its remembrance. Van Wagenen discusses how, during the mid-1990s sesquicentennial, scholars from both nations met in a number of conferences, published anthologies, and collaborated on a PBS-produced documentary. The behind-the-scenes debates were often contentious but nonetheless meaningful in shaping shared memories.

The true value of Van Wagenen's work is the long view that he takes, deftly showing how political and cultural leaders of two nations shaped memory and forgetting to fit shifting agendas over the period of more than a 150 years. Some readers might object to the alternating chapters between Mexico and the United States, but let them suggest a viable alternative. The organization effectively communicates the divergences as well as the few moments of convergence in the ways that the two nations remember their former antagonism. In the chapters on Mexico, furthermore, Van Wagenen draws on extensive research in Mexican source material. With its long-view, comparative approach, *Remembering the Forgotten War* significantly contributes to the history of memory and stands alongside Robert W. Johannsen's *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (1985), Laura Herrera Serna's *México en guerra (1846-1848): Perspectivas regionales* (1997), Jaime Javier Rodríguez's *The Literatures of the U.S.-Mexican War: Narrative, Time, and Identity* (2010), and Amy S. Greenberg's *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (2012) in providing new cultural-historical perspectives to the U.S.-Mexican War.

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