

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

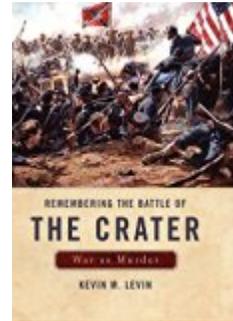
Linda Barnickel. *Milliken's Bend: A Civil War Battle in History and Memory*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013. 320 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-4992-8.

Kevin M. Levin. *Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012. 200 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3610-3.

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## War or Murder?

In the last two decades, scholarship on African American Civil War soldiers has flourished. Important books by Joseph Glatthaar (*Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* [1990]), Keith P. Wilson (*Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers during the Civil War* [2002]), Barbara A. Gannon (*The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* [2011]), and others have ensured that the wartime toil and postwar dilemmas of black soldiers in blue now occupy a fitting place in the Civil War narrative. Not coincidentally, Civil War memory studies emerged at the same time as an august subfield. Such historians as David W. Blight (*Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* [2001]), John R. Neff (*Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* [2005]), and Caroline E. Janney (*Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* [2013]) have produced rich studies of the complex ways that Americans have remembered and forgotten their Civil War.

In their impressively researched and well-written books, independent scholars Linda Barnickel and Kevin M. Levin contribute meaningfully to both historiographies, examining the historical memory (or lack thereof) of two ferocious engagements involving black troops. Barnickel's book explores the June 7, 1863, battle of Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, a bloody fight during the Vicks-

burg campaign, while Levin's treats the July 30, 1864, battle of the Crater, a most bizarre reprieve from the torpid siege operations around Petersburg, Virginia. For generations, Americans ignored the ugly massacre of black troops at the Crater, and—uniquely aided by the changing course of the Mississippi River, which gradually submerged the battlefield beneath its porridge-like mud—all but forgot Milliken's Bend. In the end, both contests were ugly demonstrations of the war's escalating violence and poignant manifestations of the war's deepest (racial) meaning.

Levin is most interested in how the story of the Crater became segregated, though he largely misses the opportunity to address how the story was sanitized. His subtitle posits that the Crater was “war as murder.” A more fascinating question is how “murder” became remembered as “war.” The dearth of monuments on the battlefields of 1864—from the Wilderness and Spotsylvania to the siege lines of Petersburg—suggests a popular distaste not merely for the mine explosion and its revolting racial aftermath, but also for the type of conflict the Civil War had become by its final year.

Dispatching the sordid details of the Crater fight in a succinct opening chapter, *Remembering the Battle of the Crater* principally focuses on the relationship between Virginia's social and political climate and the memory of

the battle. The general theme here will be familiar to most scholars: memories are inherently political, and they are rooted in the social and cultural concerns of those who do the remembering. In his discussion of the decade immediately after the war, Levin is principally concerned with the memories of Confederate veterans, who, owing to the “muted and paternalistic” racial politics of Virginia in the 1870s, were eager to recall one of their last soldierly triumphs without making deliberately provocative references to the mutilated bodies of the United States Colored Troops (p. 42).

The reasonable politics of postwar Virginia owed much to Major General William Mahone, the Confederate commander at the Crater, who steered a biracial, bipartisan coalition known as the Readjuster movement. Reminding us that the “Lost Cause” was hardly a monolithic enterprise, Levin expertly recounts the poisoned arrows hurled at Mahone by Jubal Early and others chiefly concerned about “who could claim legitimate ownership and control of Virginia’s Confederate heritage” (p. 68). Mahone’s brand of politics was ultimately conquered. The South was “redeemed,” and by the turn of the century, segregation belted the South, including Virginia. Levin has curiously little to say about the all-important decade of the 1890s, but he does take us to the 1903 reenactment spectacle staged by Confederate veterans. “For fear of reminding the local black population of their own steps toward freedom achieved during the Civil War,” Levin writes, the reenactment could not properly depict the role of African-Americans in the fight. Here, the author draws the distinction between the raw, “private” memories held by individual veterans and the official, “public” memory performed for the crowd and dominated by the Lost Cause. The story was much the same in 1937, when yet another reenactment offered a “wholly celebratory remembrance” of rebel bravery—without “any serious attention to the presence of black soldiers” (p. 105).

Throughout the book, Levin is attentive to a black “counter-memory.” For years, black memories of the Crater were manifested on the margins—with articles in veterans’ newspapers, memoirs, and black militia companies. Only in the 1950s and 1960s did the African American narrative gain visibility. (Indeed, Levin speculates that racial strife in the Petersburg area was one important reason the centennial of the Crater went entirely unmarked.) The dominant public narrative changed, however, beginning in the late 1970s. Levin ends on a note of optimism, applauding the National Park Service and local Petersburg officials for working together to render a

more nuanced interpretation of the Crater that squarely confronts race and slavery.

While Levin is interested in how subsequent generations remembered the Crater, Barnickel seeks to wrest the fight at Milliken’s Bend from historical obscurity. Although overshadowed in public memory by Port Hudson and Battery Wagner, the battle at Milliken’s Bend was significant—not least of all because it “helped change attitudes and answered in the affirmative the question of whether black troops would fight” (p. 139). Throughout the summer of 1863, abolitionists and army agents urging men of color to take up arms in defense of the Union buttressed their arguments by pointing to the heroism of black troops at Milliken’s Bend. Still, this extraordinary display of African American mettle (black soldiers accounted for more than 50 percent of the Union forces) did not leave an entirely sanguine legacy. The battle’s ugly aftermath—namely, the maltreatment by incensed Confederate troops of both white and black Union enlisted men—contributed, Barnickel argues, to the demise of the well-oiled prisoner exchange system that characterized the early years of the war.

Barnickel excels by situating the fight at Milliken’s Bend in the longer history of slavery, emancipation, and white racial anxieties in the hinterlands of Louisiana. Like Levin, she dispenses with the traditional battle narrative in a single but successful chapter, enhanced by several maps. Building on the solid foundation laid by previous scholars, she skillfully narrates the “periodic outbreaks of insurrectionary panic” in the antebellum period and the arrival of emancipation in the Mississippi River Valley (p. 12). Her treatment of the battle’s aftermath takes a similar approach. An impressively even-handed chapter unpacks the “tangle of fact, fiction, and half-truths” surrounding the fortune of the white and black prisoners bagged by Confederates at Milliken’s Bend. “Rumor sometimes gains its own force,” Barnickel writes, although she ultimately concludes that “strong evidence persists that executions took place” after the battle (pp. 112-113).

The memory theme is less well developed in Barnickel’s study, if only because “Milliken’s Bend was never a prominent battle, not even during the war” (p. 164). She briskly recounts the efforts of veterans—black and white—to safeguard the memory of black participation in the war in the late nineteenth century, but has precious little to say about the early twentieth century. Like Levin, however, she concludes by celebrating the recent efforts of the National Park Service to restore Milliken’s Bend to

public view.

These are excellent books. But while Levin's book offers a few complications, both his study and Barnickel's ultimately do little to fundamentally challenge the thesis proposed by Blight's *Race and Reunion*. In many ways, these are the predictable and predetermined tales of an emancipationist memory inevitably beleaguered by the

Lost Cause and reconciliationists. While we should celebrate with these authors the return of slavery and race to the heart of the Civil War metanarrative, we might also pose some admittedly risky questions: to what degree has the celebration of emancipation continued to conceal the war's ugly horrors? And why *do* we remember murder as war?

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