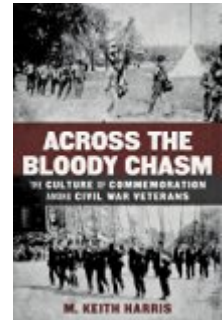


M. Keith Harris. *Across the Bloody Chasm: The Culture of Commemoration among Civil War Veterans.* Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014. 232 pp. \$42.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-5772-5.



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Commissioned by K. Stephen Prince (University of South Florida)

M. Keith Harris's *Across the Bloody Chasm* is a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarly literature on the experience of Civil War "veteranhood." Harris convincingly argues that Civil War veterans remained staunchly loyal to their causes long after the guns fell silent. Against David W. Blight's seminal *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001), which points to sectional reconciliation based on the elimination of African Americans from the war's narrative, Harris argues that race remained central to both groups of veterans throughout the Gilded Age. As Union veteran W. T. Collins put it, remembrance was the price of forgiveness—"we will never consent to public national tribute to obliterate the wide gulf which lies between principles for which we fought," he declared at a Washington, DC, rally in 1869 (p. 1).

Union veterans, Harris argues, established "a bitter commemorative tone" from the start, placing harsh memories of the war—particularly the inhumanity of Confederate prisoner-of-war camps—at the forefront of their first commemora-

tive efforts (p. 12). Further, they spent a great deal of time recounting the principles for which they fought. Their memorials and rallies articulated a clear vision of the Union they marched off to save, and as the nineteenth century advanced, they increasingly linked the notion of national unity to moral, political, and technological progress. Though abolition was not a primary goal of many Union soldiers when they enlisted, Harris maintains, they quickly embraced emancipation as the best and swiftest way to end the war and punish the rebels. This idea was not lost, he claims, in the glow of victory, and Union veterans frequently referred to their cause as not just right, but righteous.

Confederate veterans, meanwhile, argued that their cause, too, had been just. They frequently referred to the Founding Fathers, and claimed that the Confederate war effort was centered on states' rights and resistance to tyranny, not slavery. "Union victory did not suggest the triumph of principles" for most Confederate veterans, Harris asserts, and "Confederate ideology" remained

alive and well in former rebels' commemorations (p. 13). Indeed, the assertion that "we fought for what was right" remained a theme of ex-Confederate rhetoric into the twentieth century. Only the fact that "God ruled that we should not become an independent nation" accounted for Northern victory in these veterans' eyes, and many such men explicitly rejected "Lost Cause" mythology as an "apologetic whine" (p. 72). Such veterans even went so far as to challenge Northern assertions of moral superiority in the face of continuing racial strife. "Former Confederates did not hold African Americans responsible for racial unrest in the South," Harris writes, "but white Yankees" (p. 14).

Harris's sources remain close to the ground. While historians like Blight analyze reconciliationist rhetoric from many diverse groups, Harris focuses almost entirely on soldiers' memories. Veterans' organizations, particularly their newspapers and published memory books, provide a wealth of material. Organizations like the Grand Army of the Republic and the United Confederate Veterans published widely circulated journals that preserved veterans' war memories while commenting on the news of the day. Regimental histories are another rich source of data. Though often not strictly accurate in terms of a unit's battlefield performance, "regimental histories reveal a great deal about what veterans were considering at the time of writing" (p. 11). Given that these histories were explicitly designed to preserve soldiers' memories of the war for posterity, they provide a chronicle of veterans' changing attitudes toward both the war and sectional reconciliation. Veterans' public statements and private papers round out the picture.

Harris writes well, and on the whole the book is well organized and handsomely produced. The text contains a few minor errors, and pictures of veterans' celebrations would have added a bit to the overall presentation, but these are minor issues in an otherwise splendid book. *Across the Bloody Chasm* belongs between *Race and Reunion*

and Chandra Manning's *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (2007) on the bookshelf of anyone interested in Civil War veterans.

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