



**Thomas J. Brown.** *Civil War Monuments and the Militarization of America.* North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 384 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-5374-7.

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As an international student at Davidson College in the 1970s I took every opportunity to visit American Civil War battlefield parks and came to admire many of the public monuments commemorating Confederate soldiers in southern cities. Particularly impressed by the equestrian statutes of General Robert E. Lee in both Richmond and Charlottesville, as well as the statue depicting General P. G. T. Beauregard in New Orleans, I wondered why Americans were much better at memorializing and recording their past than we were in Britain. In retrospect, one may be forgiven for not foreseeing the controversy these particular statues, together with the many others dedicated to Confederate soldiers, would generate, for as Thomas J. Brown notes, in 1998 only four individuals turned up at a New Orleans rally to urge the removal of the Robert E. Lee statue that towered above Lee Circle. Just fourteen years later, however, New Orleans would become “the epicenter” of a powerful movement that resulted in fifteen southern communities taking down their outdoor Confederate monuments by 2017 (p. 289). This movement, which the author believes echoes the iconoclastic removal of the equestrian statue of George III in New York City at the birth of the Republic in 1776, is not the dominant theme of this study but the epilogue to an investigation of why Civil War monuments began to proliferate across the Ameri-

can urban landscape from the 1870s, and how this impacted American historical memory. More importantly, Brown suggests, the growing memorialization, which extended well into the 1920s, greatly enhanced the militarization of American society, to the extent that antebellum distrust of the military as an agent of corruption and the despoiler of innocent youth was gradually replaced by an assumption that patriotism, the flag, and military discipline enhanced American civic virtue.

The subject of the Civil War and American memory has been explored by a number of other historians, including David W. Blight, Robert Cook, Gary W. Gallagher, Tony Horwitz, and Michael Wilson Panhorst.[1] In 2015 Professor Brown published *Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina*, an examination on how South Carolina’s commemoration of the Civil War era helped white southerners negotiate their shifting political and social perceptions. This new study expands his investigation nationwide and offers a detailed and engaging account of the changing patterns of memorial building, the motivations behind the artists involved, how various agencies promoted the process, and how the dedication of these monuments captured public attention. In 1890, for example, 100,000 people attended the unveiling of the Lee monument in Richmond, while in 1891 not only did some 250,000 witness the dedi-

cation of the Ulysses S. Grant statue in Chicago, but in the decades following 1897 an estimated 500,000 people annually visited the Grant Monument in Washington, DC. It is no surprise to learn that President Theodore Roosevelt himself was an avid booster for such memorials, for he participated in the unveiling of statues to generals William T. Sherman, Philip Sheridan, Henry Warner Slocum, and George B. McClellan, together with several other soldier monuments. Advocating that the war itself had been an unsurpassed example of the “exaltation of a lofty ideal over merely material well-being,” Roosevelt proclaimed that the characteristics that produced a good soldier were exactly those “qualities needed to make a good citizen” (p. 172). In this new study Brown highlights three distinct, yet overlapping periods of memorialization: statues to the ordinary citizen soldier, monuments to military leaders, and later, victory monuments, such as the triumphal arch celebrating the achievements of both Union soldiers and sailors created in 1901 at the entrance to Prospect Park, Brooklyn. The sense of triumphalism that characterized these later northern monuments was replicated in many Confederate monuments, which hardly resemble, the author notes, the *revanchiste* monuments of a defeated France during the same period. Consequently, many of the southern monuments created after Reconstruction represented the transient victory of white segregationists who refused to join the ranks of the vanquished, thus perhaps typifying and deepening an “American failure to recognize failure” (p. 200).

The author’s main thesis concerning the interconnected relationship between the militarization of the United States and memorialization of the Civil War as represented by its monuments is well argued. Initially, Civil War remembrance statuary consisted largely of an obelisk or a variation of a single figure of a volunteer soldier first unveiled by Randolph Rogers in 1863 as *The Sentinel*. As the country became more urbanized and the economy expanded, veteran associations became more prominent. Consequently, the whole process of

memorialization became more politicized, and remembrance itself became something of a business. Furthermore, as the country became more racially diverse, the image of the Civil War soldier not only continued to portray an Anglo-Saxon athleticism but also became more dynamic, often representing soldiers in action and frequently accompanied by a standard bearer. In short, as the expenditure of the Pension Bureau became larger (it already consumed more than one-fifth of the federal budget by 1878), veteran organizations, especially the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), were making the “American flag an instrument of reactionary discipline” (p. 168). This is well illustrated in the text by the author’s treatment of the Chicago monument to General John A. Logan, who had helped create the GAR in 1866. Indeed, it is argued, during the Populist era—when the elite and the growing middle classes were confronted with labor strife, economic uncertainties, and class confrontation—the figure of the man on a horse, of the Civil War general, increasingly became a symbol of leadership and authority from the 1880s into the early twentieth century. Initially, Civil War monuments had reflected individual sacrifice, civic duty, and volunteerism, but these were gradually transplanted by a symbolism designed to encourage patriotic norms and economic and ethic discipline. Statues sometimes even became part of commercial urban planning and were thus situated to encourage the development of desirable neighborhoods. As such they became even more closely associated with business interests. As the writer Frank O’Hara later sarcastically remarked on the gilded statue of Victory leading General Sherman on Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Ninth Street in New York City, the allegorical “angel seems to be leading the horse into Bergdorf’s” (p. 207).

During the 1890s, when the army was becoming more professionally organized, centralized, and enlarged, a rising American Gilded Age plutocracy, it is further suggested, strengthened its grip on a nation that “avoided introspection in favor of martial self-congratulation” and which came to

view history as “as a set of unforgettable moments elevated above the wearisome obscurity of human experience” (p. 208). This trend was encouraged by the Spanish-American War and by American involvement in the First World War, but it began to wane with the creation of the American Battle Monuments Commission, which centralized the building of monuments after 1923 and actively discouraged local military memorials. The glorification of war was also weakened by the catastrophic loss of life from 1914 to 1918 and counterbalanced by the reappearance of a wish that individual sacrifice be celebrated. The reappearance of this earlier trend was further buttressed by a postwar wish to celebrate the establishment of peace itself. The pre-World War I celebration of the martial spirit and the postwar trend of recognizing individual sacrifice were later exemplified, Brown concludes, by two of the most important public monuments constructed after 1945: the 1954 Marine Corps Monument in Arlington, Virginia, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, established in Washington, DC, in 1982.

Overall, this is a well-illustrated, interesting, and deeply researched study that is copiously footnoted and contains a useful twenty-five-page bibliography. It will remain a standard work on American Civil War monuments for some time, but what of the author’s main thesis that the building of Civil War monuments both reflected and helped transform the institutionalization of the military in American life? Generally, the argument is persuasive, but perhaps a little overstated. The Civil War was unquestionably a watershed in the development of the United States, but antebellum America was hardly a Jeffersonian, antimilitaristic idyll. Jefferson himself, it should be noted, authorized the founding of West Point, and historians of the early republic, such as Eliga H. Gould in *The Powers of the Earth* (2012), have reemphasized that the antebellum period may have been once portrayed as an empire of liberty, but it was an empire nonetheless, and one that invaded Canada twice, purchased Louisiana, invaded Spanish Florida, and in

the three decades before the election of Abraham Lincoln, annexed Texas, undertook a number of campaigns against Native Americans, fought a war with Mexico, and elected four ex-generals to the presidency. Consequently, during the 1850s four notable equestrian statues appeared, and if the statues to Andrew Jackson in Washington, DC and New Orleans are not considered here, one may question whether the Henry Kirke Brown statue of George Washington, finally constructed in Union Square, New York City, in 1856 envisioned “equalitarian leadership on the battlefield” or even the “republican subordination of military glory” (p. 153). In a work of such a wide canvas one would expect to find the occasional questionable remark, such as Zachary Taylor being “one of President Polk’s inept commanders of Mexican War volunteers” (p. 4), but these do not diminish the importance of the vast research that underpins this study.

The author’s claim that the recent protests against, and the removal of, Confederate statues constitutes a return to the iconoclasm of 1776 remains something of a moot point. Motivated by the unfortunate killing of black youths in Miami, New Orleans, and Ferguson, Missouri, the resulting effective online tagging of these Confederate memorials as outdated symbols of white supremacy greatly aided the movement on the ground to take them down. Whether the erasure of such monuments can cleanse the American past remains to be evaluated, as does the possibility that the modern use of mobile telephones and computers is creating an obsession with the present at the expense of understanding, but not necessarily condoning, the historical past. Brown’s conclusions thus point the way to further evaluations of the impact technology has, and will have, on our future relationship with aspects of our history we may now find disagreeable.

#### Note

[1]. See, for example, David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*

(Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961–1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); Gary W. Gallagher, *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998); Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); and Michael W. Panhorst, *The Memorial Art and Architecture of Vicksburg National Military Park* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2014).

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