



David W. Blight. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. 512 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-00332-3.



Reviewed by Joan Waugh

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A long-awaited book by one of the finest historians of the Civil War era, *Race and Reunion* lives up to high expectations. David Blight, the Class of 1959 Professor of History and Black Studies at Amherst College, demonstrates that a national memory based on reconciliation triumphed over at least several other competing and equally important "memories" of the war. By the early 1900s, Blight contends, sectional harmony had emerged as the dominant motif in many histories, commemorations, reunions, monuments, novels, and plays. Competing narratives were diminished or erased. One of those narratives was the story of slavery, emancipation, and freedom. Blight places this story back at center stage, where it belongs, and in doing so provides a stunning examination of how Civil War memory was created and sustained. Blight's argument, written in densely packed prose, is simply put: in the four decades after the Civil War southern and northern whites agreed that the deepest meaning of the conflict was to be found in commemorating the valor and courage of the soldiers of both sides. The "Union Cause" had transfigured into the "Lost Cause,"

lending credence to the saying "The North won the war but lost the peace."

To my mind, the heart and soul of *Race and Reunion* lie in Blight's examination of just how the "Emancipationist Vision" of the war articulated by Frederick Douglass and others was obscured and even obliterated from national history. Two of Blight's chapters particularly illuminate this process. Chapter 3, "Decoration Days" (later called Memorial Day) traces the origins of the day of remembrance to the activities of African Americans and former abolitionists in Charleston, South Carolina (p. 73). On May 1, 1865, ten thousand ex-slaves participated in ceremonies that commemorated fallen Union soldiers. Mindful of the sacrifices that both black and white people had made so that freedom could be nationalized, the participants enthusiastically embraced the trappings and symbols of citizenship. On this occasion, African Americans celebrated the progress that had been made by the war, and the progress that they hoped would come with Reconstruction.

In the late 1860s, Decoration Days proliferated throughout the country. By the 1880s, "many a

speech flowed with reconciliation as it honored the dead." Blight notes that African Americans increasingly occupied a "marginal place ... in white Civil War memory." How, and even more importantly, why, should African Americans remember the war? Blight takes this question up in chapter 9, "Black Memory and the Progress of the Race." Frederick Douglass's struggle to keep the freedom flame burning was aided by W. E. B. Du Bois's trenchant criticism of racist mythology that denied African Americans agency in history and justice in the present. Alternatively, the most important "race leader" in the late nineteenth century, Booker T. Washington, urged his people to forget and forgive past grievances, like slavery, and work hard for progress. Thus, African Americans faced complex dilemmas on how to reconcile the bitter legacy of slavery, with the freedom the Civil War delivered, and the promises of that freedom dashed by Jim Crow.

Race and Reunion also offers a series of impeccably researched chapters on Reconstruction, veterans, war literature, and soldiers great and small. Familiar figures of the era—U. S. Grant, William T. Sherman, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Jefferson Davis—are analyzed for what they contributed to "peace among whites." Each chapter unfolds a complex case study—of the "Soldier's Faith," or of the "Lost Cause"—that convincingly chronicles the way in which certain memories were privileged while others suppressed, sometimes brutally. Blight describes how the bitterly partisan politics of Reconstruction led to the withdrawal of northern support for black suffrage and economic independence. Many in the North, fearful of labor disturbances and popular anti-business movements, moved quickly to forge cross-sectional ties that emphasized reconciliation and downplayed the controversial issues that gave rise to the Civil War.

White veterans gave emotional resonance to the drive for national unity when they met in carefully orchestrated "friendly" reunions

throughout the 1880s and 1890s. The shared experiences of soldierhood was a theme that could bring former enemies together peacefully on the anniversaries of storied battles, such as Gettysburg. Ex-Confederate and ex-Union soldiers now celebrated the valor of both sides fighting for equally honorable causes. Organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and the Confederate Veterans lent considerable political and social influence to promoting the courage of Billy Yank and Johnny Reb. Reunions alone, however, could not erase the troubled legacy of slavery and the myriad complications of emancipation. In the 1880s and 1890s, there was a vast outpouring of published Civil War regimental histories, memoirs by leading generals such as U. S. Grant, and soldiers' reminiscences that largely sentimentalized white reunion. Magazines, like *Century Magazine*, published self-described "objective" accounts of great battles and leaders of the war that were avidly read by the public.

Few accounts of the African American experience in the war found their way into the pages of the successful *Century* series. The works of southern writers such as Walter Hines Page and Joel Chandler Harris, on the other hand, popularized a romanticized image of the pre-war South, emphasizing faithful and loyal slaves. They demeaned the history of hundreds of thousands of black men and women who willingly embraced freedom and fought for their rights.

Blight does not ignore opposition to reconciliation sentiment. Monuments, like the Shaw Memorial in Boston, and commemorations, like Du Bois's "The Star of Ethiopia" pageant, celebrated black participation in the Civil War. "Emancipation Day" remained important in the black calendar. Many, many northern veterans decried the heavy emphasis on blue and gray comradeship (as did southern veterans from the opposite point of view). Blight quotes one former Union soldier in 1879 as describing the Civil War as "a death grapple between right and wrong." He went on to

denounce the southern cause saying that the treasonous actions deserved to be "so punished ... that it might never come to be eulogized as true loyalty" (p. 95). If anything, Blight underplays northern dissent, manifested in speeches, parades, and reunions, and in published accounts of the war. As Barbara Gannon has recently shown, there were more than a few interracial GAR posts, and black and white veterans joined together in various commemorative activities.[1] Nor did allegiance to country and freedom, the "Union Cause," disappear from the speeches and eulogies of prominent politicians, ministers, and ex-generals in the North. Known today primarily for its reconciliationist sentiment, Grant's *Memoirs*, published in 1885, also contained two strongly worded refutations of the Lost Cause ideology. "The cause of the great War of the Rebellion against the United States will have to be attributed to slavery," Grant wrote. And that cause, he noted in his chapter on Appomattox, was "one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse." [2]

Despite notable and continued opposition, by the early decades of the twentieth century, the whitewashing of Civil War history had occurred. The cause of the Confederacy had been states' rights without slavery, and the cause of the United States had been union without freedom. Blight's epilogue on the semi-centennial of the Civil War summarizes powerfully the themes of sectional harmony and a "white only" version of the War that had been building for decades.

By 1915, Blight argues, the memory of the war was "a quarrel forgotten" (p. 384). In *Race and Reunion*, David W. Blight reminds us that the cause of the Civil War was slavery, and that its most important consequence was freedom. Blight's book should be required reading for a national dialogue about slavery, race, the Civil War, and the relevance of how Americans remember, and forget, their past.

Notes

[1]. Barbara A. Gannon, "Sites of Memory, Sites of Glory: African-American Grand Army of the Republic Posts in Pennsylvania," in *Making and Remaking Pennsylvania's Civil War*, eds. William Blair and William Pencak (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001): pp. 166-187.

[2]. *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1885): p. 549, p. 489.

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