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The Civil War and Historical Memory: A Historiographical Survey

Stuart McConnell

Scholarship on the American Civil War continues to pour off the presses with no end in sight. James McPherson recently estimated that more than 50,000 books and articles have been published on the conflict; as early as 1962, Don Fehrenbacher thought that 100,000 was closer to the mark. It is one of the few historical eras in which commercial publishers maintain an interest (the History Book Club, for example, devotes an entire section of its monthly catalogue to “Yankees and Rebels”), while films such as *Glory* and the Ken Burns documentary series “The Civil War” have shown the huge potential audience for visual tellings of Civil War stories. The war remains the defining event of national history, one that every school of historical interpretation must come to grips with sooner or later. Perhaps for this reason, such fields as social history and gender history, which have long ignored the war, have recently taken it up.

For teachers of history, the enduring public fascination with the Civil War presents special dangers. If not placed in context, study of the events of 1861-1865 can easily degenerate into the sort of pleasant antiquarianism that collects old uniform buttons, or worries about the position of Longstreet at Gettysburg. While not irrelevant, such historical tourism may lead students to view the past as a foreign coun-

try, in which things are charmingly different and safely distant, rather than as the site of still-unresolved struggles over region, race, economic power, and the nature of the American national state.

On the other hand, popular interest in the Civil War gives teachers a unique opportunity to engage students with the question of historical memory itself. The abundance of published primary documents

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of every variety, often generated by people who were painfully conscious of themselves as actors in history (Abraham Lincoln is one good example), gives instructors the resources to examine the lives of individuals who were in some sense making history and writing it at the same time. Several of the articles in this issue look not only at the Civil War experiences of soldiers such as William T. Sherman and Daniel

Bond, but also at their later memories of those experiences.

In addition, the Civil War history industry of the last century can be fruitful as an object of study in itself. The most obvious question to ask is why the war has generated so much sustained attention compared with other events in United States history. Why do people still find it compelling, and what do they find compelling about it? By examining the very different things that historians, writers, filmmakers, and ordinary people (from re-enactors to genealogists) have chosen to remember about the war over the past 128 years, we can give students an introduction not only to the events of history, but to the changing ways in which American culture processes those events—in other words, to its historical memory.

Historical memory as a field has blossomed in the last five years or so, with major works by David Blight, John Bodnar, John R. Gillis, Michael Kammen, David Lowenthal, and George Mosse, and a special 1989 issue of the *Journal of American History* that was later issued in book form (1). In part, this vogue represents professional historians' rediscovery of the obvious: non-historians have memories too. Whereas once historians made sharp distinctions between memory (idiosyncratic, personal, constitutive of personality) and formal history (projective,



Soldiers in the Army of the Potomac give an enthusiastic salute to their new leader, General George B. McClellan, at Franklin, Virginia, 3 April 1862.

social, constitutive of “national identity”), they are now prone to study ordinary people as historians. Where the Civil War is concerned, Bell Wiley’s *The Life of Johnny Reb* (1943) and *The Life of Billy Yank* (1952) were early (and often neglected) examples of the genre. More recently, Reid Mitchell and Gerald Linderman have penned Civil War narratives based on the letters and memoirs of ordinary footsoldiers, while Gaines Foster and Nina Silber (a contributor to this issue) have examined the ways in which memories of the war haunted the postbellum South (2).

Interest in what might be called the popular historiography of the Civil War, in turn, grows out of two major changes in historical practice during the past twenty-five years. The first, visible in nearly every subfield of United States history, is the inclusion of previously neglected voices, notably those of women and African Americans. The second, more narrowly the concern of Civil War specialists, has been a gradual move away from study of the war’s

causes—a subject that preoccupied historians before 1960—and toward an examination of its consequences.

The earliest histories of the Civil War (when not simply the *apologias* of participants) tended to focus on the coming of the war, on its moral irrepressibility. Slavery, thought James Ford Rhodes, whose *History of the Civil War* (1917) was perhaps the most influential work of the genre, was an uncompromisable moral issue that made war between the sections inevitable. The Progressive historians who followed (notably Charles and Mary Beard) emphasized economic conflict between Northern capitalists and Southern agrarians, not slavery, but found the war no less inevitable—Yankees and Cavaliers were bound to come to blows.

In the late 1930s and 1940s, historians such as Avery Craven, James Randall, and Frank Owsley began to question the inevitability thesis. The war, they wrote, had been a colossal blunder, brought on by fanatic abolitionists and a generation of incompetent politicians. The so-called

“avoidable tragedy” school they spawned was influential into the 1950s. The histories written after World War II, however, tended to emphasize the war’s tragedy, irony, and essential irrationality. Writers such as David Donald and William Taylor argued that Americans of both sections were the victims of myths, and were really much closer on many points than they realized. Under this reading, the moral irrepressibility stressed by Rhodes’ generation was a form of emotional disturbance (3).

After 1960 came a sea change in Civil War scholarship. Influenced by the civil rights movement, scholars such as Kenneth Stampp, Willie Lee Rose, and later Eric Foner and Ronald Walters, rehabilitated the historical reputations of the abolitionists and postwar Radicals. The antislavery movement was now portrayed as principled opposition to an insufferable institution, while the Reconstruction governments of the 1870s were depicted as having made real improvements—albeit limited ones—in the lives of freed slaves (4).

With slavery and race at the forefront of discussion, histories of the period gradually moved away from politics and toward social and economic history. The voices of slaves themselves were rediscovered in such sources as the WPA slave narratives, and in the published narrative of Frederick Douglass, which came out in more than a dozen editions. Eugene Genovese, in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, used these and other plantation sources to recreate "the world the slaves made." Dozens of authors, employing the newly available tools of quantitative history, focused on the economics of slavery (5).

The emergence of slave voices from the hidden abode led to intensive study of other neglected groups. Joseph Glatthaar, among others, reexamined the thousands of black troops who fought in the Civil War. A number of works based on ordinary foot soldiers' letters and diaries appeared, including a new rash of regimental histories. The contributors to Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber's *Divided Houses* have recently connected the Civil War with issues of

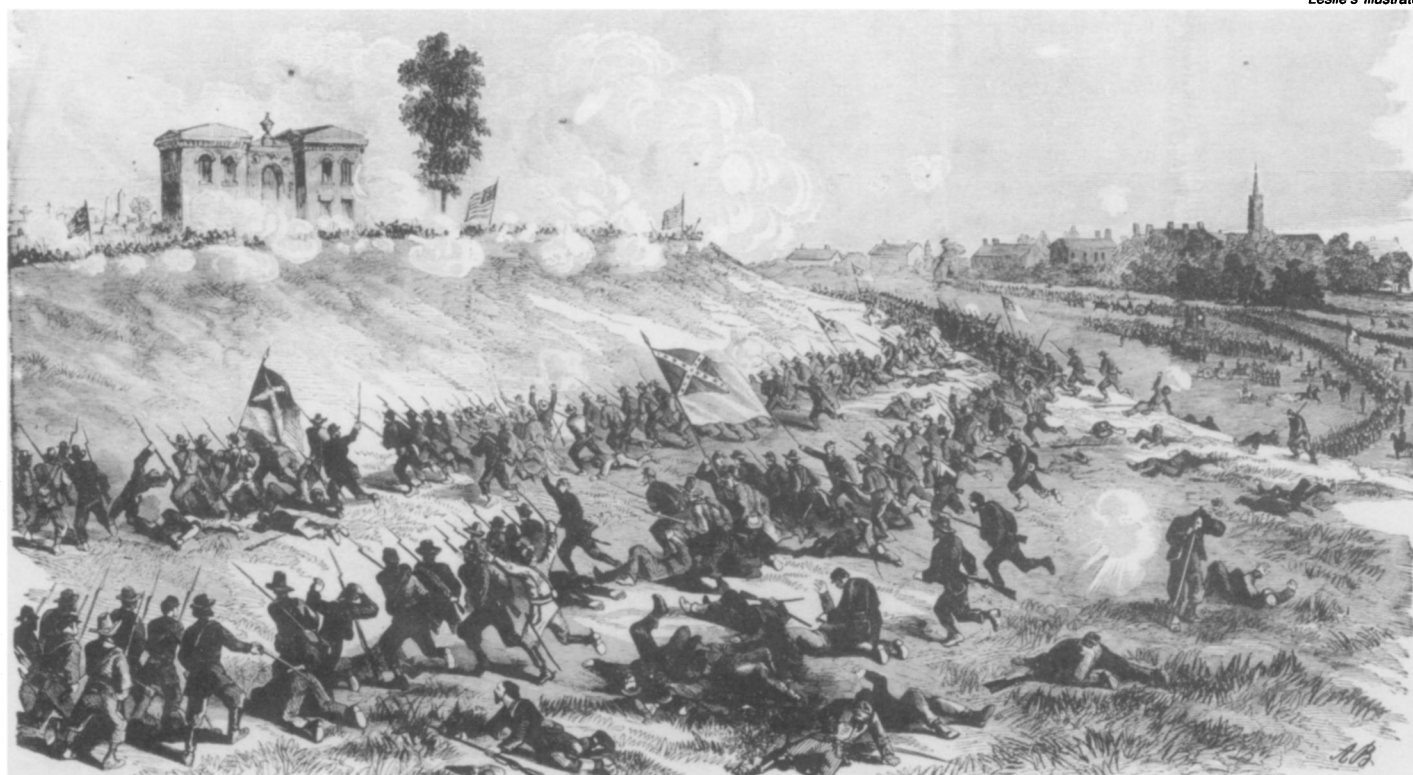
gender. And among the recent overviews, Phillip Paludan's *A People's Contest* devotes a great deal of attention to the perceptions of non-elite actors and to the Union and Confederate home fronts, while McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*, in most respects a traditional political and military narrative, devotes more space to these subjects than did similar syntheses twenty years ago (6).

The picture that seems to be emerging from this explosion of new work is one of both armies, Confederates and Federals, fighting to preserve doomed social systems: slavery in the South, and what is usually called republicanism or small producerism in the North. Neither white Southerners nor white Northerners, it is argued, got what they wanted from the war, while for the freed slaves Reconstruction remained (in Foner's words) an "unfinished revolution." The war, in short, was not without meaning or consequences, but delivered far less than its leaders promised to participants. Mitchell and Linderman's books in particular dwell

on the progressive disillusionment experienced by Civil War volunteers, a theme that Mitchell suggests (correctly, in my view) has become more visible in the wake of the Vietnam War.

The welter of new actors in the drama of Civil War history has also raised popular historical memory as a significant theoretical issue, for in order to generalize about the views of slaves, or plantation mistresses, or Minnesota corporals, one needs some kind of explanatory framework. Foster's work on the memories of Confederate veterans, and my own on those of Union veterans, are tentative steps in the direction of such a framework. As yet, however, there is no popular equivalent to the more traditional march of academic historiography (7).

What has happened is that historians have tended to follow their new sources, away from questions of causation (about which ordinary people understandably had little to say) and toward studies of the war's effects (about which they said a great deal). Practically every essay in a new collection



Leslie's Illustrated

The Battle of Gettysburg, 1-3 July 1863, was a decisive battle and later resulted in the over-crowding of both Union and Confederate prisons.

on the social history of the Civil War deals with its consequences: for municipal politics, for widows' pensions, for charity organizations, for veterans. Theda Skocpol's new history treats the Civil War pension system as the seedbed of American social welfare policy. Among economic historians, arguments over the profitability of slavery have been replaced by investigations of the postbellum New South (8).

Does the postwar turn in Civil War scholarship mean that after fifty thousand books, Americans are finally putting the war behind them? Hardly. It is instead evidence of the continuous revelation that this most destructive of American wars still holds for scholars and buffs, teachers and students alike. As we reshape our tellings of the Civil War story to work through the anxieties of our own time, we are only the latest in a long—and intriguing—line of memorialists. □

Endnotes

1. David Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Patriotism, and Commemoration in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991); David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); David Thelen, ed., *Memory and American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
2. Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers: Their Expectations and Their Experiences* (New York: Viking, 1988); Gerald Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Gaines Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).
3. Three excellent works that trace the course of Civil War scholarship up to the 1960s are Thomas J. Pressly, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954); Don E. Fehrenbacher, "Disunion and Reunion," in John Higham, ed., *The Reconstruction of American History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962); and Eric Foner, "The Causes of the American Civil War: Recent Interpretations and New Directions," *Civil War History* 20 (September 1974): 197-214.
4. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South* (New York: Knopf, 1956), and *The Era of Reconstruction* (New York: Knopf, 1966); Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), and *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism after 1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
5. John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1977); in economic history, the best-known study is Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), but see Richard Sutch, "The Treatment Received by American Slaves: A Critical Review of the Evidence Presented in *Time on the Cross*," *Explorations in Economic History* 12 (1975), and Fogel and Engerman, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1989).
6. Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Free Press, 1990); as a good example of the new regimental history, see Warren Wilkinson, *Mother, May You Never See the Sights I Have Seen: The Fifty-Seventh Massachusetts Veteran Volunteers in the Army of the Potomac, 1864-1865*; Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Phillip S. Paludan, *A People's Contest: The Union and Civil War, 1861-1865* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
7. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*; Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).
8. Maris Vinovskis, ed., *Toward a Social History of the American Civil War: Exploratory Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); in economic history, Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: the Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), and Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

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