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An Evening with David Blight

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Abstract

Monday evening, November 18, students from Gettysburg College got to sit down and discuss memory with Dr. David Blight from Yale University, author of the renowned work *Race and Reunion*. The session was conducted as an informal panel with Dr. Blight and Gettysburg College's own Dr. Isherwood and Dr. Jordan. Dr. Blight spoke about beginning his work when memory studies was not an official field and stumbling his way headlong into working with the memory of the American Civil War. When discussing whether or not memory studies were a fad that would pass away, Blight reassured the audience that people have doing memory studies long before there was an official field. Memory is essential to who we are as human beings and all peoples and all nations construct their past in a way that is useable to their future. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Gettysburg College, Civil War Memory, David Blight, Ian Isherwood, Brian Jordan, *Race and Reunion*

Disciplines

History | Military History | Social History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

An Evening with David Blight

DECEMBER 9, 2013

By: Sarah Johnson, '15

Monday evening, November 18, students from Gettysburg College got to sit down and discuss memory with Dr. David Blight from Yale University, author of the renowned work *Race and Reunion*. The session was conducted as an informal panel with Dr. Blight and Gettysburg College's own Dr. Isherwood and Dr. Jordan. Dr. Blight spoke about beginning his work when memory studies was not an official field and stumbling his way headlong into working with the memory of the American Civil War. When discussing whether or not memory studies were a fad that would pass away, Blight reassured the audience that people have been doing memory studies long before there was an official field. Memory is essential to who we are as human beings and all peoples and all nations construct their past in a way that is useable to their future.



During the open question and answer session, one student asked if memory studies could be likened to a public historiography of how the memory of an event changes and shifts over time. Dr. Blight responded with an anecdote from a conference on race where the panelists discussed race as a social construct. Afterwards, the keynote speaker stood

and said that although the panel was excellent, the average individual walking on the street still believed in race. The question was, how do academics transfer their knowledge to the greater public in a relevant way? This question was relevant to Dr. Jordan's comment about how Union veterans returning home were often cast aside as the civilian population tried to move on and forget the ugliness of war. Dr. Jordan warned the audience that just because the Wounded Warrior Project exists does not mean that Americans today are not falling into some of the same tendencies of Civil War Era Americans and cited statistics for homeless and unemployed veterans of the Iraq war. Though academics understand these discrepancies, they need to begin fostering dialogues with the public about deficiencies between public opinion and reality.

One of the final questions posed dealt with the relationship between memory and identity. Dr. Blight argued that the two are so intertwined that some scholars will use the term identity in the place of memory. Dr. Isherwood, a British historian who specializes in the First World War, said that for Britons, so much of their identity today finds its roots on the first day of the Somme and the changes in society brought about by the war.

Afterwards, students and professors lingered over refreshments and continued their discussions. It was a great opportunity for students to be in dialogue with their professors and be able to talk with one of the leading historians in Civil War Memory in such an informal and comfortable way.