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## An Unsettling Civil War: A Review of *Ruin Nation*

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# An Unsettling Civil War: A Review of *Ruin Nation*

## **Abstract**

This review of Meghan Kate Nelson's *Ruin Nation* examines the immense environmental destruction and social impact of the Civil War. This brief review analyzes Nelson's work and its implications for Civil War history.

## **Keywords**

book review, Nelson, ruination, destruction, Civil War, environment

## **An Unsettling Civil War – A Review of *Ruin Nation***

Lincoln Fitch  
*Book Review*

Meghan Kate Nelson in *Ruin Nation* elegantly reminds the reader of the devastating impact of the Civil War on the American landscape and the transformation that ensued. The war irrevocably ravaged cities, homes, forests, and the bodies of soldiers. *Ruin Nation* delves into this destruction and the immense repercussion on Americans. Furthermore, it offers a reintroduction to the terrifying cost of the Civil War and ruination's profound significance in understanding that war. As Nelson writes, "Without its [the Civil War's] ruins, we cannot fully understand the terrifying nature of wartime violence and the complex and contradictory nation that it created."<sup>47</sup> By systematically dissecting these ruins, Nelson offers a profound understanding of the cost of the Civil War.

In this work, Meghan Kate Nelson utilizes a profound array of sources in crafting her narrative. A network of scholarly sources establishes the foundation upon which her argument is built. These sources corroborate the claims made by the author. Although these sources are frequently referenced in footnotes, they are rarely quoted directly. Instead, she relies upon a vast array of primary sources to create the shape of her argument. These give personal and tangible evidence to support her thesis. Images are frequently used in order to give the reader a visual experience of the war's ruination. First hand experiences recorded in diaries and letters by both commoners and significant figures bring ruination directly to the

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47 Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press 2012), p. 239.

reader. In this way, the author balances social history with political history. This moderate approach offers a multi-dimensional view of the effects of ruination that holds onto the voices of ordinary people without neglecting the crucial figures.

*Ruin Nation* methodically analyzes the preeminent canvases upon which the ruination of the war was fashioned: cities, homes, forests and men. Hampton, Chambersburg, and Columbia provide distinct and compelling examples of the war's cost to cities and the vast implications of that cost. These acts of devastation began a national questioning of the nature of warfare, the justice of retribution, and who was responsible for ruination. In light of this immense ruination, many Americans reconsidered the efficacy of war policy. Nelson examines both the physical damage of ruination inflicted on these cities and the lasting psychological damage. Additionally, this book looks at the distressing ways in which the war landscape confronted homes. Homes frequently stood in the path of the great demolishing agent that was the Civil War. They were ransacked, pillaged, used as cover, and strategically destroyed. In this way, the war invaded the most sacred space of privacy. Similarly, the war laid waste to Southern forests. Forests were desolated by battles, the transportation of troops, and the construction of camps, earth works, shelters, and places of recreation. The war also irrevocably wrecked the bodies of men and their notions of masculinity. These wounds put soldiers' "masculinity in peril." They upset the gender dynamic as demonstrated in the illustrations of a woman with her arm around her husband's waist and the woman driving the stagecoach next to her maimed husband. Despite some government assistance, it was difficult for handicapped men to find work, which further

undermined their role in family and society. The ruination of men's bodies upset the cult of domesticity that dominated 19<sup>th</sup> century homes and brought about a reorganization of gender roles. Nelson's book astutely analyzes the ways in which the ruination of cities, homes, forests, and men's bodies during the war led to transformation afterwards.<sup>48</sup>



Ruins of Columbia – Sketch by William Waud

(Source: Library of Congress)

This work is but an introduction to the vast devastation that the war caused. Therefore, more analysis on other areas of ruination including rivers, social structure, financial, and commercial interests would have given a deeper understanding of the multi-faceted costs of the Civil War.

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48 Ibid, 169, 194-195.

Importantly, the immense death toll of the war and the psychological implications caused by the empty chair at the dinner table deserve the attention of scholars. The death toll of war often becomes a disembodied number that utterly fails to grasp the gravitas of the cost. Nelson makes a strong case of the effects of war ruination, yet the transformation it enables is not made clear. Therefore, more sources commenting on the effects of ruination distanced from the war would cement these claims. Despite some minor limitations, this book is a profound work that offers a more disturbing, more authentic understanding of the war to both the scholarly community and the public.

Too often the true costs of the Civil War have been maligned in the name of unity, national identity and reconciliation. Meghan Kate Nelson reminds us of the vast significance of the war's devastation. The war demolished cities, homes, forests and citizens and left ruins in their stead. These ruins were a physical reminder of the enormous cost of this war and they force historians to consider unsettling questions about the "nature of civilized warfare, the legitimacy of retribution, the taking of responsibility, the relationship between domesticity and privacy, the necessity of destruction in the construction of landscapes of war, the unstable ideal of American masculinity, and the authenticity of modernity."<sup>49</sup> By annihilating these markers, we have suppressed the difficult issues of war in favor of a polished narrative of reverence and unity.

Due to the desire for national reconciliation, public aversion to traumatic sites, and nature's growth over the last 150 years, much of the disturbing ruins of the Civil War have been erased. In their stead we have

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49 Ibid, 239.

the pristine battlefields and a tidied up Civil War – a war of heroism and bravery that brought us closer together as a nation. Gone are the severed limbs, the mangled bodies, the devastated forests, the pillaged homes, the ransacked cities, and the battlefields strewn with the dead and dying. American history needs to uncover the unsettling realities that have long been ignored.

The perplexing and infamous General Dan Sickles lost his leg to cannon fire at Gettysburg and sent it to U.S. Army Medical Museum to be stored. Throughout the rest of his life he took frequent pilgrimage to visit his leg and remember what the war had cost him. Like Dan Sickles, we as historians of the Civil War must visit the painful, dark, difficult and disturbing costs of our neat little war.